

Blind

By: ObsidianSickle

-SasuSaku- -Complete- It was almost time, Orochimaru was going to take his body as a vessel. He hated being used...he refused to be used. With that thought, he took the kunai in his hand and slashed across his eyes.

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Chapter 1

Blind

A/N: Okay, you know why I love author's notes? It makes the pages seem a lot less blank and intimidating for me to write on when there's a big fat author's note sitting at the top of the page.

Anyways... This, as you can probably tell, is a SasuSaku fanfic, that I started writing as a result of the despair I was feeling from Sasuke leaving Konoha, becoming evil, and most importantly, hurting Sakura. Meh, I'm tired of reading fics where Sasuke just randomly comes back, gets together with Sakura and live happily ever after. (grins evilly) I wanted to make something more complex than that. Title is both figurative and literal.

Disclaimer: I sadly do not own Naruto—because if I did, I would have bashed Sasuke over the head with the Fork of Common Sense, thereby preventing his departure from Konoha. I don't own the Fork of Common Sense either. That belongs to Muffin-moto :3

Love is patient, love is kind.

It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.

It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always preserves.

- 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Chapter One: Blackness and Darkness

Today, Sakura was dressed entirely in black.

The usual red tank top, with the white trim, which she regularly wore, was tucked away in her closet that day. Instead she was wearing a long-sleeved shirt that covered her wrists and part of her hands, and long loose pants replaced the usual pink skirt that went with her shirt. If she wore socks with her sandals, they would have been black too. The only thing that was not black about Sakura that day was her brilliant viridian eyes, her petal pink hair, and the red forehead protector that kept her hair back.

She was walking now to work at the hospital, where again she would practice the skills that the Fifth Hokage, Tsunade, had taught her. She smiled readily as she went, and waved to people she knew, greeting them brightly, however each and every person stared at her attire, though none could find a polite way of commenting about it. Sakura did not mind, in fact it was better for her if they did not ask—she did not want to have to explain to anyone why she was wearing black, it was just too painful to think about.

Despite the smiles and cheerful waves she gave people as she went, a dark feeling of gloom rested on her shoulders. She had a good reason for wearing black that day, for it was almost exactly—

"SAKURA-CHAN!" came an exuberant exclamation from behind her. A small smile appeared on her lips as Sakura shook her head from side to side. Perhaps a dose of Naruto would be enough to keep her mind off of her sadness.

Turning her head back down the path that she had just come from, Sakura saw Naruto sprinting towards her, waving energetically at her. A broad grin was on his fox-like face, and Naruto's other hand was towing a very reddened Hinata along. He skidded to a stop in front of her and almost crashed into some people who were walking by, much to Sakura's alarm. Naruto on the other hand seemed undaunted (or he simply did not notice) and looked at Sakura happily.

"Heya, Sakura-chan!" he grinned.

"Good morning, Naruto, Hinata," she smiled to both of them, "Why are you two in such a hurry this morning?"

"Oh, well...not really in a hurry," Naruto scratched the back of his head thoughtfully, "It's just that I bumped into Neji, Hinata and Ten Ten, and I decided to treat them to ramen tonight. I was wondering if you wanted to come, Sakura-chan, because you seem awfully...I dunno, distant lately."

Off to the side, Sakura could see Hinata blushing over the fact that Naruto was treating her to ramen. She kept glancing at Naruto's hand that was clasped with hers. Sakura smiled slightly. It was almost like a double date, even if Naruto was too stupid to realize that Hinata liked him very much. She shook her head politely at Naruto.

"Sorry, Naruto," she apologized, "I have a lot of work to get done today at the hospital, and I don't think I can make it tonight." Not to mention that she would feel out of place, being the only one without male company. Additionally, she would rather be alone that day.

"Aw, come on Sakura-chan!" Naruto begged, "It'll be lots of fun!"

"Thanks for the offer Naruto," she shook her head a little more firmly, knowing that if she gave him an inch, he would never give up begging, "but perhaps another time. I'm just too busy. I'm really sorry that I can't come, as much as I'd like too."

"Couldn't you just skip out on work today, Sakura-chan?"

"Definitely not," she said firmly, "People are depending on me. And besides, I'm sure you don't need my company. Hinata, Neji, Ten Ten and you can have a wonderful time without me."

"Sa-Sakura-san," Hinata spoke up shyly, "They do say, the more t-the merrier."

"Well, they also say that less is more," Sakura smiled in return, "Humans sure contradict themselves, don't they? Anyways, I'm going to be late if I don't hurry. Thank you for the offer, but I'll come along next time if I'm able. Ja ne!"

Naruto sulked while Hinata nodded understandingly. Sakura smiled and waved before turning and walking briskly down the street. She had wasted too much time as it was. Tsunade was very strict when it came to being on time. 'You could save a life if you come even just a few minutes earlier,' she had emphasized and Sakura remembered absently wondering how she dealt with Kakashi, who was *always* late.

Pushing open the doors to the hospital, Sakura greeted the smell of disinfectants and cleanliness with the usual twitch. How she hated that smell. And to be greeted by it every day was not nice. She supposed the smell was a relief for those who went down, thinking they were going to die, and waking again to find the smell of the hospital in the nostrils. However, Sakura was not one of those people; to her the hospital reeked. She shook her head firmly, not wanting to waste any more time by dwelling on the stench of the hospital, she ran up to the reception desk.

"Good morning, Sakura," the receptionist greeted her, smiling, "Tsunade-sama is already waiting for you with a patient on the fourth floor, room four eighty three."

"Thanks a ton!" Sakura replied, running to the elevator. Checking her watch she squeaked in apprehension, she had only three minutes to get up to the fourth floor. The elevator seemed to be taking forever and she mashed the button on the wall impatiently. After what seemed to be an eternity, the door opened and Sakura dashed inside, pushing the button for the fourth floor. She breathed a sigh of relief as the elevator began to move upwards. Looked like she might be on time anyways.

It was damp—always damp. He hated damp. Being a fire user, damp always irked him, for reasons unknown even to him. It was not like it was anything new to him, it had always been dank in the underground that was Orochimaru's base, and one would think that after three years of residing in various underground bases, he would have grown used to it. But even after that extended period of time, Sasuke still hated the musty smell.

Perhaps it was because of the tinge of apprehension he felt that day that the smell and the feeling in the air bothered him more than ever. Orochimaru had summoned him, said that he needed to speak with him over a small matter. Sasuke scoffed quietly to himself, he was not stupid, and Orochimaru knew he was not fooled, and therefore had placed the room heavily under guard. Not that he couldn't deal with the guards—it was just the inconvenience of causing a ruckus, thereby bringing more Sound Ninja onto his tail. Then it would be difficult to continue to escape.

Sasuke slammed his fist down hard onto the concrete wall next to his bed, so hard that it cracked and crumbled slightly from the force. It was *not* supposed to end up this way! Orochimaru had promised him power, and granted, had given it. But Sasuke knew that Orochimaru had not trained him to the full extent of the Sannin's power; he feared Sasuke, and therefore did not want to give him more power than he could control. He was probably going to wait until he had taken over Sasuke's body before continuing to strengthen his host.

That bastard.

Sasuke had had it all planned out: by this time, three years from when he left Konoha, he would have trained and used Orochimaru's power to eventually surpass the sannin, and kill him. Afterwards he would go forth and use the Sharingan to collect different techniques in order to exceed his brother's skill. It was obvious what he would do afterwards. He would avenge his clan.

But of course his plans had naturally been ruined when today Sasuke was called forth to 'talk' with Orochimaru over a small matter. The small matter in question, of course, was the transfer of Orochimaru's tainted soul into his body, something that he had planned on keeping from happening. But he realized that at his current state, he had no chance in defeating the sannin; he could perhaps put up a decent fight, and injure his sensei critically, but Sasuke knew that he would most likely be dead before Orochimaru. And that of course was unacceptable.

Sasuke held his head in his hands, his fingers tangled in his dark locks; his jaw was clenched and a scowl was visible. It was almost time... Orochimaru would obviously have him escorted to have their little 'chat', and then Sasuke knew his own body would be out of his control. His sensei didn't give a damn about his revenge, and most likely would not avenge the Uchiha clan, even if he requested it.

Standing up abruptly, Sasuke began to pace around the room in an irritated manner. There had to be some way out of this. He had not strove to become stronger only to end up being Orochimaru's host. He knew he had been used, he had known from the very beginning that he would be used, but of course he had planned to have Orochimaru dead before he would *actually* be used. If there was one thing that bothered Sasuke more than anything else, it was being used. He had to think of a way to get out of this situation without getting killed. He refused to be used.

' *Think!*' he reprimanded himself, his fists clenching and unclenching behind his back as he paced back and forth. There must be some way of preventing it; there must be a way out—a way that Orochimaru would not want to take over his body.

He paused and looked at his hands, flexing them slightly. There had to be a way... He closed his eyes, going over in his head what exactly Orochimaru needed him for. There were only a couple things, come to think of it. Orochimaru wanted him for his Sharingan...aside from skill and speed, there was no real point in keeping him alive.

Slowly sinking to his knees on the concrete floor he closed his eyes and sighed. The only thing he could think of doing, was *un* thinkable. If he did *that* , there was a good chance he would never be able to defeat Itachi. He could probably break his own bones if he needed, but that would only prevent Orochimaru from temporarily taking his body. That bastard, Kabuto, could probably heal any disfiguration he caused himself. Kabuto, as much as Sasuke did not want to admit it, was skilled in his arte, and any injuries would mended as good as new, not hindering his speed or skill. Sasuke grumbled to himself, pacing again, trying to think of alternative ways of escaping, but only drew up blanks.

He thought again to his first choice of action... it was so risky. To live, free of Orochimaru but not be able to defeat Itachi, or to be inhabited by Orochimaru but most likely have his desires rejected. Either way was a no-win situation. He thought about it some more, his mind growing ever anxious as the weight of the situation crushed him. He had to make his decision, quickly.

He turned over his only other option in his head... There was always a slim possibility that he could work around the hindrance...but he could see no way of ever recovering completely. He knew that if he were to do it, it had to be in a way so damaging that not even Kabuto could fix it, for if he were able to recover, Orochimaru would see to it that Sasuke would, and then take him as a host.

Sasuke drew a kunai from the pouch at his hip, and turned it over in his hand, watching the dark metal glinting dangerously. He closed his eyes for a moment, thinking deeply about what seemed the only other course of action other than being the next vessel. Against his will, his brother's hateful face appeared in his mind, speaking to him softly, darkly.

Hate me.

Despise me.

Run, and survive in the most despicable way.

Sasuke wrenched his eyes open, clutching the kunai tightly in his fists, not noticing the blade digging into his fingers. *Survive in the most despicable way.* Sasuke took a deep calming breath and slowly relaxed his hands. His knees hurt on the floor on which he was kneeling, the cold ground keeping his senses sharp and alert. *Survive in the most despicable way.*

Then he heard it, faintly at first, but unmistakable—there were footsteps in the hall, and they were coming this way. He glanced sharply over his shoulder, then down at the kunai. His heart began pounding in his chest, his brow and hands breaking into a sweat; he bit into his lip fiercely, tasting blood. The kunai glinted dangerously in his hands, the footsteps getting louder still. He dropped his left hand and clenched the kunai's handle in his right, his arm shaking.

The footsteps were outside his door now and had stopped. He heard Kabuto's voice ordering the guards to open the door. There was a clinking of keys. The doorknob turning, and then he heard the slight creak of the door being opened.

The most despicable way.

With a determined resolve, Sasuke raised the kunai above his head and with great force he slashed the sharp blade across his eyes. The damp odour of the underground was soon stained with the scent of blood, and the silence was punctured by an agonized scream.

"That was good, Sakura," Tsunade praised her pupil as she came away from the ninja's newly healed body, "You're getting better everyday. You are a very talented girl."

"lie, Tsunade-sama," Sakura shook her head, "I couldn't do it without your help."

Tsunade smiled and put her hand on the shoulder of her pupil, and chuckled. Sakura smiled back, the Inner Sakura rejoicing at the praise.

"You did well this morning, you deserve a good break," Tsunade smiled, "Come to the cafeteria and I'll treat you to lunch."

Sakura shook her head apologetically, "Oh, I couldn't let you do that. I'm just doing my job as your student." In reality, she just felt like being alone.

"Nonsense," Tsunade said firmly, before turning to exit the room, "You deserve a reward. Come now, let's go before the break is over."

The way that she stated it, Sakura knew that she would be unable to argue further. She smiled slightly at Tsunade's retreating back—Tsunade was a strict teacher and a smile was a rare thing to get out of her, she did feel proud that she had managed to heal the ninja's severe wounds, but that did not make her misery go away. Inner Sakura, who had rejoiced at the praise, went back to sitting in the emo corner of Sakura's mind, sitting depressingly as she had done all day.

Slowly Sakura walked after her teacher, not letting her Inner Sakura show outwardly. Tsunade was holding the elevator ready for Sakura and she quickly scampered over and entered, the doors closing behind her. Tsunade began to make comments on her chakra use, speaking about how Sakura did her medical healing in a slightly different method than herself.

"It's still as effective, perhaps even more so," Tsunade was saying, "It's an interesting technique you have. It's a way that I never thought of using, perhaps because it makes it slightly more difficult, but it seems to work well enough for you."

"You flatter me, shishou," Sakura said smiling, but she was only half listening. Part of her outer Sakura was sitting in the emo corner with the inner one.

They chatted idly as they proceeded to the cafeteria. Contrary to the popular belief, the food there was better than your average hospital, and Sakura had no qualms about having to pick food from there to

eat. She and Tsunade sat down and ate lunch in silence. Sakura's mind wandered about, letting her depressing thoughts float about the room; she saw people come and go, nurses running about, patients being cared for, but not did not really take it in.

"Sakura."

Turning her attention away from her depression, her outer self focused on Tsunade, who was staring at her student in a perceptive manner, "Yes, Tsunade-sama?"

"Tell me," she said, poking her salad with a fork, "why you are wearing black today."

It was not a question, it was an order; the tone stated that she could not refuse answering. Sakura blinked for a moment, then opened her mouth, carefully choosing her words, "Well, my regular clothing gets so dirty when I work, I thought perhaps black would hide the grime more. Then at least I could walk around without looking disgraceful."

"I see," Tsunade replied, sounding skeptical. She took a sip from her glass of water—which Sakura insisted she get instead of going and getting some sake, "You just felt like wearing all black today so that you wouldn't get dirty?"

"Well, I..."

"Sakura," Tsunade's voice was in a warning tone; Sakura knew that her sensei did not like to be lied to.

Looking down at her half-eaten lunch, Sakura hung her head. She spoke quietly when she finally managed to open her mouth, having difficulty choking out the words, "It's been three years since I heard that Orochimaru took on another host other than Sasuke. This year...is the one where he can take a new host... this year Sasuke... Sasuke-kun is..."

The words died on her mouth; unable to force them out, she did not even bother to try and speak further.

"I see..." Tsunade took a bite of her salad, munched on it for a while then swallowed, "You know, Sakura, the chances of him returning to Konoha were reduced almost to zero as soon as he left for Orochimaru's power. You knew that he might never return. It is even less likely now that he will come back at all."

"I know," Sakura murmured quietly, "It's just that he is such a caring person, even if he never showed it."

"Was," Tsunade spoke sharply, " Was a caring person. I think he had already lost his ability to care about anything right before he left the village."

"Tsunade-sama, please don't talk that way about Sasuke-kun," she spoke quietly, "I know from when I met him leaving the village, that there was a shred of hope for him."

"A shred is a very small thing, Sakura," Tsunade replied tersely, "It has been out of our hands for quite some time now. I suggest that you get your mourning over with quickly, so that you are able to focus on things more important than lost comrades."

"Yes, Tsunade-sama," Sakura responded inaudibly. Despite Tsunade telling her to do otherwise, she did not want to forget about Sasuke, he was her first love, her last love, her *only* love. Not wanting to look at her teacher at the moment, she wracked her mind to for things to talk about other than Sasuke. Sakura could find nothing to say; her mind was so burdened. She found the silence awkward, even though it had only lasted a couple of seconds.

Mercifully, as if by some unknown force, Shizune seemed to appear out of now where, brandishing a large stack of papers in the Hokage's face.

"Tsunade-sama! I have *finally* found you!" Shizune reprimanded the woman, clearly flustered. Sakura looked up slightly at the young woman, who looked like she had combed the town over twice before finding the troublesome Hokage, "Why are you taking a lunch break when you have all these papers to go through?!"

"Calm down Shizune, I was going to get around to them..."

"Most likely tomorrow if not later!" Shizune retorted in a frustrated manner, "Please, Tsunade-sama, come to your office and get as many done as you can. Please?"

Tsunade stood up with a heavy sigh. "Fine, fine! Just stop badgering me!" she turned to Sakura, "Sakura, finish your lunch and I'll see you this afternoon. Try and forget about Sasuke; even though you remember him, he has most likely not bothered to remember you."

Sakura nodded mutely and took another half-hearted bite of her lunch as a very agitated Shizune dragged her teacher off.

Tsunade's words had hit her painfully, and she knew in her heart she could never do what her mentor asked. She could never forget about Sasuke...ever.

It was a very angry Kabuto who was dragging him along the musty hall, that was all Sasuke could tell. His eyes hurt like the fires of hell had entered them, and he could no longer see; only once before had he had wound that hurt even more so than this one, and that was when Orochimaru had given him the curse mark, had given him power.

Blood was running over his face and into his nose and mouth, he could taste and smell it distinctly. He was crying out in pain; he could hear himself yelling out, even though he was not consciously aware that he was actually doing so. He struggled slightly, his eyes burning, but he was too weak from loss of blood to put up a fight. He didn't know what would happen to him now, but he did not care, it had

been his choice to blind himself. He could end up a dead man either way, blinding himself or no, but even blinded, he could at least have a chance of survival.

There was a creak as the door to Orochimaru's chamber opened, and Sasuke was dumped unceremoniously down on the ground, at what he assumed was at Orochimaru's feet.

"Orochimaru-sama," Kabuto stated in an important tone, though Sasuke could hear a faint tremble in his voice. The coward no doubt knew that he would be held responsible for what happened to his master's new vessel, "We have a problem."

There was a scuffling, and the rustle of clothes and Sasuke found his chin being nudged by someone's foot, in an investigative manner. Sasuke had his eyelids shut tight, though the pain did not abate. It felt less strange to not be able to see when his eyes were closed opposed to when they were open. The foot dropped away then kicked his shoulder hard; Sasuke merely winced, as the pain was nothing compared to the burning of his eyes.

"Why, Sasuke-kun?" came Orochimaru's silky voice, near his head. The voice was soft, but it dripped with anger and loathing, like poison from the fangs of a snake, "Why have you done this terrible thing, Sasuke-kun?"

Keeping his mouth tightly shut, only emitting groans of pain, Sasuke did not reply, knowing that in order to live he had to play his cards carefully. He felt Orochimaru rustle past him and over to the other side of him.

"Kabuto," the voice was still deadly, "Can he be healed?"

Someone, most likely Kabuto, kicked him over onto his back, and the warm breath he felt on his face suggested that someone was examining him. A hand grabbed his chin roughly and held his lolling head still. There was a pause, then the hand and breath receded, allowing Sasuke to curl up on the floor.

"I could heal the wound, but he would never be able to see again, let alone use the Sharingan," came Kabuto's serious voice, a slightly nervous tone laced uncertainly into it.

There was a long pause, and the tension was laid so heavily in the room that it could have been cut with a kunai, "I see."

"What would you like me to do?" Kabuto asked as rustling fabric made its way away from Sasuke's injured form.

There was another long pause, "Make sure he is duly punished and then dump his body in the woods."

"Would you like him killed?" Kabuto asked.

"It matters not, with the amount of blood he's lost, he will die soon," Orochimaru replied, "Make sure his last moments are painful."

"Would you like the memory erased?"

Another pause, "In the unlikely event that he does survive, remove only the important parts."

"Yes, Orochimaru-sama," there was a rustle of fabric as Kabuto bowed over to his master, and then another rustle. The voice was projected in another direction as Kabuto spoke again, "You, take him to the dungeons, I will be there shortly."

"As for you, Kabuto," Orochimaru's voice grew fainter as Sasuke was dimly aware of him being dragged away, "We have to discuss your carelessness in letting our little Sasuke from getting injured in such a manner."

Sasuke could not make out Kabuto's response as his mind hazed, and he lost consciousness.

A/N: Chapter one! Please review with your questions comments and concerns. I'm sure there are some major concerns for Sasuke, granted the state he's in. I'm trying to stay constant with all the "kuns" and "samas" and the like, but it's kind of difficult to remember who calls whom what. I try, I do. But just for future reference, Sakura will be dropping her "kuns" for Sasuke for a while. There's a reason in the story for that, but my personal reason is that it annoys me. It makes her sound like a fangirl to me when she calls him "Sasuke-kun". Don't ask me why, it just does.

Anyways, please review! Arigato gozaimasu!

Drieldwin

Chapter 2

A/N: O...m...g...! Wow! I love you guys so much! And I mean that sincerely too. When I left for school the morning after I posted this story I was expecting to come home from school and find only two reviews sitting in my inbox. Imagine my surprise when I come home and find eleven and the number increasing throughout the day! I wanted to post this sooner, being touched by you guys reviewing and all, but I wanted to rake in a few more reviews before posting. Sorry! But here's the second chapter. Also there was a slight delay as I was researching people's names... I hope I got the last names right.

p.s. I know that Asuma dies later on in the anime/manga, but I haven't gotten there yet. So for all intents and purposes of this fic, he's alive. Deal with it :p

Chapter Two: Beneath the Blossoming Cherry Tree

"Let's stop for a break," Asuma announced as he held out his arm, causing his team to stop.

"What, again?" Kurenai exclaimed impatiently, sighing heavily, "This is the third time since we've finished the mission. We should rest *after* we've informed the Hokage of the completion of the mission!"

Asuma cast a glance at her as he took out a cigarette from the package he always seemed to have on him. He hopped down to the ground and leaned leisurely up against a tree, "There's no hurry."

"Another cigarette?" Kurenai rolled her eyes despairingly, her shoulders sagged, "You know, you should really quit."

"Well, it didn't get in the way of our mission, did it?" Asuma replied, a lazy grin on his face as the cigarette hung from his mouth.

"No, but I would assume informing the Hokage of our success is more important than your nicotine addiction," Kurenai retorted, but only got a shrug from her teammate. She groaned loudly and looked over at Kakashi who had been silent during the ordeal, "A little support would be nice, Kakashi."

"Just relax, Kurenai," Kakashi commented, hanging from the bottom of a tree branch by his feet, "Enjoy yourself while Asuma smokes himself into an early grave. We have a lot of time to get back, we don't need to be hasty."

Kurenai narrowed her eyes suspiciously and peered at Kakashi in a distrustful manner, "I know *you* don't mind stopping—it gives you a chance to get a few more pages read from that stupid book."

Kakashi was holding said book in front of his nose. He gave a little shrug, "I'm just not putting the time of this break to waste, that's all."

Kurenai groaned in increasing frustration, appalled at her companions' laziness, "You know what, I'm going to go out and scout the area."

"Whatever for?" Kakashi inquired, looking up from his book and down at Kurenai, "Nobody's chasing us."

"I'm not putting the time of this break to waste, that's all," she retorted smugly, using Kakashi's own words. She leapt up to a branch in a tall tree before pausing and turning to her companions, "I'll contact you on the radio if anything happens to me."

"Like anything's going to happen," muttered Asuma to himself, as Kurenai left the vicinity.

"She should take up a hobby," Kakashi commented thoughtfully, "Like knitting. I've heard it calms the nerves. Honestly, scouting the area is such a waste of a lovely break."

Asuma took a long drag from his cigarette, nodding in mute agreement with Kakashi's statement.

Sakura walked home after another long day of work, wiping the sweat from her brows. She had met Ten Ten at lunchtime and spent her break chatting with her friend, asking how the ramen dinner was the previous night. Apparently they had all had a wonderful time, even though Naruto ended up spilling Hinata's tea all over the countertop. Sakura had smiled then, that was your typical Naruto—so clumsy.

Ten Ten had also said that it was too bad that Sakura couldn't make it and expressed concerns over whether they were working her too hard at the hospital. With a warm smile and a shake of the head Sakura replied that the workload wasn't too bad, and also said that she would come for ramen the next time they all went out. Truly she was touched by her friend's concern for her, and she felt a little guilty about using work as an excuse, seeing as she hadn't been kept late at all at that hospital yesterday at all.

Tsunade had actually let her out early in order for her to replenish her chakra—healing the Konoha ninja earlier the previous morning had drained her considerably. But despite her fatigue, she had not gone home to rest, but rather had wandered around town the rest of the evening, letting her depression envelop her. She found herself wandering to places where she had strong memories of Sasuke—where they had first fought Kakashi to become genin, the academy where she watched him practice throwing shuriken, and the path that led out of Konoha...the place where she had failed to stop him.

Despite her wanderings, she automatically avoided the ramen shop like the Black Plague, fearing that she may be spotted, and draw on unwanted company. Lost in thought, she found herself drawn to the Uchiha complex, where other residents had long moved in since the terrible massacre nine years previous. Only the Uchiha manor, where Sasuke's family had lived, and where he himself had lived alone after the tragedy, was left untouched by the changing

neighborhood. Sakura had heard, though she could not remember where, that the building was to be sold if Sasuke failed to return and atone for his crimes within five years of his departure. Looking up at the beautiful building, she swore to herself that she would buy the house if need be; she would never let anyone else inhabit it—for that would confirm that he was gone forever.

Gloom had clouded her eyes as she looked up at the traditional architecture; three years had passed already since Sasuke left, and time had taken its toll as the fine-looking construction was falling into disrepair. Without even thinking about it, Sakura had waited until nobody was paying attention to her before slipping quietly around the side of the house, to find a back entrance. The reason behind her desire to enter the empty house eluded even her, as she clambered through the overgrown garden and onto the back porch.

Eventually, with a piece of stiff wire, she managed to pick open the lock on the back door and enter the empty structure. There had been a thick layer of dust on everything, showing that the house had remained untouched since its owner's leave-taking. Having never been inside the old house before, Sakura found herself drifting about the house, looking at the different things in the deserted rooms, but not laying a finger on anything.

It wasn't until that she found an old broom in the corner of the kitchen that she laid hands on any of Sasuke's belongings. Grabbing it slowly, she had begun to sweep out the thick layer of dust from the kitchen.

' *For when he comes back,*' she had told herself silently, knowing that he would never return.

It was the broom that had started it—sweeping the kitchen had soon become sweeping out the whole house, and when she found an old rag hanging on the lip of a bucket, she proceeded to dust every shelf and object she found. When that task was finished, she washed all the dishes of dust, and cleaned out the cupboards, getting rid of the food that long since spoiled and sorting the non-perishables into

canned and packaged groups. After that she came across the dusty sheets in the hall closet and promptly washed it all and even went as far as to remaking the beds.

After the whole house had been cleaned, Sakura hauled herself home and collapsed into her bed, exhausted. She had done it: she had cleaned the entire house. And it wasn't until she had fallen asleep yesterday night, that she had done the enormous chore for no one.

Kurenai hopped from tree to tree, making a rough perimeter around the area where she had left her two comrades lying around lazily. In all honesty, she couldn't believe them sometimes—sure they had completed their mission, but that gave them no reason to wander lazily back to Konoha, taking the time to smell the flowers along the way. Sometimes they reminded her of a couple of schoolboys.

Alighting neatly on a sturdy branch that was several feet above the ground, Kurenai surveyed the area. There was absolutely nothing to hint that there was a remote possibility that they'd be attacked by anything. Looking about she wondered dimly why she was even bothering—the setting was completely off for an attack, what with the sun shining brightly overhead, and the birds twittering cheerfully. Two butterflies had even fluttered by her while she scouted for an enemy that clearly didn't exist.

This was ridiculous; they should have just kept on going, Asuma's nicotine addiction or no.

Inhaling deeply in order to let out a heavy sigh, Kurenai caught the fragrances that hung in the air. There was a heavy scent of wildflowers, mixed with a splash of fresh green grass, containing the smell of new leaves on the trees. She paused in the middle of her sigh and simply smiled; how she enjoyed the season of spring—but unlike her two teammates, she was willing to ignore it until the mission was officially over.

About to leap into the air again, she halted briefly...they were still on break, and there was time left—there really was no point in continuing scouting, so she might as well do what Kakashi said: relax. If she had been made team leader, this never would have happened. Looking about the area again with her crimson orbs, she made sure they were not in any danger—though it was already obvious they weren't—before resting down on the branch, her legs dangling. She decided to let herself be pampered by the break, though she would never hear the end of it if she let Asuma and Kakashi find out.

Focusing the chakra in her nose like her pupil Kiba did, her sense of smell became enhanced, and she let the delicate scents wash over her like a perfume. It was the smell of spring and she marveled at the acuteness at which she could distinguish the smells. She was even able to pick out the names of a few individual based on the fragrances she smelled, and probably would have been able to name more if she had known what the flowers were called.

The cool breeze shifted slightly in direction and a new wave of smells washed over Kurenai—the smell of new leaves on the trees, a touch of moist earth, and faintly, the unmistakable smell of a flowering cherry tree. Slowly, a new odour wove its way into her chakra-enhanced nose—an unpleasant, metallic-like odour. It was so sharp in comparison to the other smells that she wondered why she had not noticed it earlier. A deep frown creased her brow, her crimson eyes narrowing. She knew that smell only too well. It was the stench of blood.

Sakura's night after the talk with Tsunade had been filled with nightmares from the Forest of Death during the chuunin exams. The next day, thankfully, had been entirely uneventful, allowing her tiredness not to interfere with any serious work that she would have maybe needed to tackle. Of the patients that came in that day to be seen, Sakura had only healed the scraped knee of a little boy, dealt with a sprained ankle and helped an old lady who had fallen and

fractured her hip. As Sakura trudged home from the hospital she felt hardly tired. Her chakra hadn't even come close to running low, and she then understood the feeling that Naruto felt when was given a 'lame' mission to work on.

The sky wasn't even dark as she left the stinky hospital—Tsunade had told her to go home early again, and get some rest, as they were expecting a group of jounin returning that evening. She wanted her apprentice available in case there was anything nasty when they returned. Sakura had debated with herself whether to return to Sasuke's house, but decided against it. The house was clean; there was nothing for her to do there.

Dragging her feet, Sakura wandered home, going mostly on autopilot; as there was nothing to do, there was nothing to keep outer Sakura distracted from joining Inner Sakura in the emo corner. That was where she was now, in the deepest recesses of her mind, despairing over the loss of Sasuke.

"Sakura?"

Sakura looked up with a smile on her face, ready to fool whoever was greeting her into thinking that she was not as miserable as she felt, but her face quickly fell again as she found out the caller of her name. It was Ino, standing outside the flower shop, taking down the display of flowers that stood outside the door.

"What do you want, Ino?" she asked heavily, not in the mood for arguing.

Ino gave a smirk, "Sorry, bill-board brow, didn't know I wasn't allowed to ask what was getting you down."

Sakura sighed and rubbed her temples, a slight headache coming on, "It's nothing...nothing I'd expect *you* to remember anyways."

Ino rested her hands on her hips and frowned a little, "Care to share?"

"Not really," was Sakura's blunt reply before she started walking again.

"I'm betting it has something to do with why you're wearing black," Ino remarked snidely, as Sakura drew level with her, "Who died?"

Sakura came to an abrupt stop, her feet suddenly refusing to move. Petal pink bangs dangled in front of her eyes, hiding the tears that were forming as her head was hung dolefully.

"Nobody died," Sakura whispered quietly, refusing to look at Ino, "Just please leave me alone today."

Stepping nimbly in front of Sakura with her arms stretched wide, Ino blocked the path as Sakura took a step forward. "Tell me, Sakura."

Again, like Tsunade's tone, it was an order, not a request, spoken in a way that could not be argued against. With a quiet exhalation, Sakura replied quietly, "It's three years to the day, as of tomorrow, that Sasuke-kun left Konoha."

Ino, whose arms were still stretched out wide, slowly dropped them to the side, looking worriedly at the girl whom she had once called her best friend.

"That means that Orochimaru will have the ability to take over... Sasuke-kun's body," Sakura continued without being asked to do so, "His body will no longer be his to control, even if his soul still lives... He is as good as dead the world."

A tear fell off the end of her nose and landed with a quiet drip on the ground. Hugging her black covered arms, she tried to let the midnight folds encompass her—make her disappear.

"I need to go home, Ino," she said shakily, "I need my strength for tomorrow, you know?"

Ino did not even raise a finger to stop Sakura as she passed by, but stared after her, not sure what to do, if there was something she could do. Quietly and quickly Sakura headed up the street, slipping past her mother in the kitchen unnoticed, and up the stairs to her bedroom. Ino would probably cause her a world of trouble now that she had revealed the reason behind her mourning, but Sakura simply failed to care.

Gingerly she picked up the octagonal frame that held her picture of team seven. It was the only picture she had of him, the only reminder of a happy time long past. She hugged the photo close to her heart, and lay down on the bed, letting the tears run silently down her face.

Kurenai had quickly leapt to her feet at the smell of the blood, and made her way across the terrain quickly, following the scent as quickly as she could before the wind changed directions. The chakra that she had concentrated in her nose was dismissed as the smell became overwhelming—now, even without her enhanced senses, she could find the odour distinctly in the air, and soon a small thin trail of blood could be seen on the forest floor.

Leaping branch to branch she followed it, noting how it was straight in direction, like something had dragged the injured being. The straight trail then ended in a pool of blood, and Kurenai dropped down to the ground, touching the red liquid experimentally. It was sticky and partially dried; whatever had been there had only been there a few hours earlier. The trail of blood then continued through the forest, except it was splattered in a wavering line. Whatever had been bleeding had either escaped, or had been left to die and had struggled onward regardless.

Despite the age of the blood, and the amount lost, there was still a small chance that whatever it was, or whoever it was, was still alive somewhere. Of course it could be the blood of an injured animal, but it was good just to be sure—it might save someone's life.

Quickly she ran after the trail of blood, following it for a while on the forest floor; it was thinner than before, like some of the bleeding had stopped, and the blood only pooled where the thing had stopped to rest. Kurenai jumped over a tree root, side stepped a branch, and almost tripped as the forest seem to cut off abruptly before her into a clearing.

The trail of blood continued into the clearing, where Kurenai saw it disappear into the grasses. She looked about the clearing for anything that was potentially dangerous and marveled at the sight. A large, full-grown cherry tree grew in the middle of the field on top of a smallish hill—this must have been the tree that she caught scent of earlier, before she smelled the blood.

Having decided that there was no immediate danger, Kurenai crept forward, brushing aside the grasses, keeping an eye on the trail of blood. Whatever it was, despite the severe injuries it had suffered, had managed to haul itself up the hill. Kurenai trudged up the side, and saw the path of blood disappear around the trunk of the tree, where it most likely continued down the other side of the hill.

She walked slowly up to the tree and laid her hand on the thick trunk, feeling the bark under her skin as she walked around the tree. Peering around the old trunk, she jumped back in surprise—the trail of blood had ended, to reveal crumpled figure at its base. Kurenai clutched at her beating heart—she had not expected there to be anything at all.

Throwing aside her fear, she quickly knelt down next to the figure. A boy—no, a young man—around his mid-late teens was sprawled out at the base of the trunk, leaning against the strong bark. His dark hair was matted with blood, along with the clothing he wore. His chin was resting on his chest, and his longish hair covered his face. The left arm was broken and bent at a grotesque angle; both arms were covered with numerous cuts and burn marks and his clothing was torn to shreds. Some of the blossoms from the cherry tree had drifted down and landed on his unconscious form, creating a poetic

and grotesque juxtaposition. Kurenai felt pity in her heart—he was so young to die so soon.

A slight movement caught her eye, as she was about to leave, feeling grim from the sight—she thought she saw the young man's chest rise and fall faintly, like taking a shallow breath. Perhaps it was just the cloth fluttering in the wind, but nonetheless Kurenai reached out to find a pulse at his neck. Much to her surprise and wonder, she found one, thumping weakly against her fingers—it was a miracle he was alive.

Raising a hand to her ear, she turned on the emergency radio, adjusting the frequency nimbly and quickly, "Asuma, Kakashi—there's something you should see."

"Gotcha, what's up?" came Asuma's voice.

"Just come!" Kurenai replied frustratedly, "I'm northwest of your position by about a click. Look for me at the base of a flowering cherry tree in a clearing."

"We'll be there soon," came Kakashi's voice, the lazy tone dropped.

Putting the radio away, Kurenai turned and lifted the boy's right arm. Her healing abilities were limited at best, but at least she could bandage the wounds on his arms and legs while she waited. Maybe if the two of them did not come quickly she would set his arm in a sling. Taking out a small salve out of the pouch at her hip, and opening her water bottle, she began to clean and dress his wounds. She wished Kakashi and Asuma would hurry—again, it was almost a miracle that the young man was alive after how far he dragged himself through the woods. But miracle or no, if she did not hurry to assist him, he could die regardless.

A rustle came from behind her and Kakashi and Asuma appeared at the young man's side, bending down to examine him.

"Glad you came," she said turning to them, "He's still alive. Asuma, you have some basic medical training. Help me set his arm."

Asuma nodded dumbly as he took the boy's arm gently in his. He held the two parts of the arm in his hands before speaking, "He could be beyond hope still—if we get a reaction from setting his arm then there's chance he might live, opposed to no reaction, which would mean he's a dead man."

Kurenai nodded as she readied a long bandage while Kakashi found a branch to use as a splint. Asuma turned the broken arm in his hands, bringing the two pieces together—Kakashi and Kurenai watched the young man anxiously for a reaction, and both breathed a sigh of relief as a painful groan came from the unconscious figure. His head lolled slightly to the side, and rested on his right shoulder, a cherry blossom drifted down and landed on his forehead. Kurenai blinked at the state of his face.

A long gash ran across his eyes, and the blood from that wound had run down his face and dried. There were burns and cuts on his forehead and cheeks, and they looked dirty and painful. The fabric of his tattered shirt shifted as he moved, revealing a darkish mark on his neck. Kurenai's eyes widened as the boy's identity became apparent to her. She opened her mouth to speak, but Kakashi beat her to it.

"Good gods," he remarked quietly in shock, "It's Uchiha Sasuke."

It was 1:00 a.m. when Sakura's mother shook her hastily awake. Sitting up groggily, she murmured an incoherent question as she winced at her sore back. The position she had fallen asleep in had been very uncomfortable and as a result she was stiff and sore all over. Her fingers had also evidently stiffened as well as she had trouble prying them off the frame that she was still clutching in her arms. When she set the photo aside, she faced her patient mother, who was standing worriedly above her.

"What's the matter?" Sakura asked, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"It's the people from the hospital," her mother said in a serious tone, "They were given specific instructions to come and bring you to the hospital. Apparently an emergency case just arrived and Tsunade-sama requires your assistance."

In an instant Sakura was awake and running down the stairs, taking three at a time. Her mother was yelling something after her from the top of the stairs as Sakura pulled on a black jacket.

"They said they wouldn't have come if Tsunade-sama hadn't specifically requested—" her mother was abruptly cut off as Sakura slammed the door behind her. She did not stop moving as she exited, but signaled for the medical ninja to follow after her. As she ran hurriedly down the street, the head of the squad matched her pace.

"What's the situation?" Sakura asked, not wanting to waste any times on explanations. If it was emergency enough to call her awake at night like this, she could not afford to waste any time. She had only been called out twice before in the previous three years, and she knew she had to be ready the instant they called. She had understood this before she became the Fifth Hokage's pupil—she had to be able to sacrifice her own well being for the sake of someone else.

"We don't know," the medic replied uncertainly, "We were just dispatched to get you, and were not informed on current events. I do believe it has to do with the jounin team that came in a few minutes ago."

"Which jounin?" Sakura asked as they began to run up the hospital's front steps—each patient was different and she had to adjust her chakra flow accordingly.

"Sarutobi Asuma, Yuuhi Kurenai, and Hatake Kakashi," replied the medic, then added as Sakura ran for the stairs, who ignoring the

slow elevator, "Second floor, room two hundred twenty one!"

Sakura practically flew up the stairs and down the hall, rushing noisily into the designated room as she flung the doors wide. The sight before her had her worried—not only was Tsunade bent over the patient in deep concentration, but Shizune and another advanced medical ninja were working on the patient too. As soon as Sakura entered, Shizune looked up sharply at her.

"Sakura, help me heal the wounds on his legs," she barked quickly—Tsunade was in deep concentration, and Sakura realized that she was not to be interrupted.

Quickly she dashed over to Shizune's side and began peeling away the makeshift bandages that had been applied, gasping at the sight. There were deep gashes and dangerous burns all along the left leg, and glancing over at the work that Shizune was doing, the other leg appeared in the same condition. Without a second thought, Sakura began to cause the chakra to form in her hands, guiding it and controlling it with a slight twist that she had added as her own technique. The cuts and burns were easy enough to heal, but the patient seemed near death.

She glanced up towards the head and torso of the figure for a brief moment, seeing how severe the rest of the wounds were. The other medical ninja was working on repairing a broken arm, while Tsunade held both hands extended over the patient's head. Her long sleeves dangled down, making it impossible for Sakura to see the face. Turning her attention back to her task, she focused on restoring the wounds. The quick glance she had taken also revealed a bag of blood hanging near the head of the bed, dripping the red fluid into the patient's veins. Sakura knew if she could heal the wounds, the patient would lose less blood.

Slowly she moved her hands up the leg, healing each wound with care, being sure that there was not a scar left on the patient's body. When she reached the knee, the other medical ninja, who had just finished mending the broken arm, took over. Sakura took a split

second breather before taking the newly mended arm, getting rid of the cuts and burns there too.

Hours dragged by, but to the apprehensive Sakura, it seemed to take years. Sweat beaded her brow, but she remained committed to her task—she felt that if she were able to heal as many people as she could, get stronger as a medical ninja, then perhaps one day she would devise a method of extracting Orochimaru's soul from Sasuke's body. She had to save this young man, even if she did not know who he was, because each life saved strengthened her, and for each life lost, she strove harder the next time.

The group worked tirelessly over the young man, and eventually Shizune, the medical ninja, and herself finished healing his body. Only the Hokage remained, her chakra focused on the young man's head.

Sakura left the bedside, knowing there was nothing more she could do to help. Splashing cold water on her face, she knew that only Tsunade could fix whatever wounds remained. Shizune came and stood beside Sakura as they watched the Hokage work.

"What happened?" Sakura asked, rubbing her face dry with a paper towel.

"I'm not sure," Shizuna murmured quietly, "But Asuma's team came in with him in that terrible state—barely alive. Apparently they found him on the way back from their mission."

Sakura nodded dumbly and hoped that whoever the young man was, that he would be okay.

"Come," Shizune said, beckoning Sakura to follow, "We should not disturb Tsunade-sama. There's nothing more we can do to help, so we had best leave her in peace."

Sakura nodded dumbly as she followed the Hokage's young assistant from the small room, feeling utterly and completely

exhausted.

A/N: That's chapter two people! I hope I'm not progressing the storyline too quickly. And I'm sorry that Sasuke's thoughts were not in this chapter—but he was unconscious for the entire thing...it's kinda hard writing the thoughts of an unconscious person. Definitely Sasuke's thoughts will be in the next chapter, so just you wait patiently now.

Please review! I love getting them; they give me warm fuzzies.

Drieldwin

Chapter 3

A/N: OMG! I **love** you guys for your support! Thank you so much for all the reviews and the stunning number of alerts and favourites this story has been put on! I got a couple questions from the reviewers, so I'm going to answer them all in one fell swoop:

Q: Will Sasuke be blind for the rest of the story?

A: You have five choices: yes, it's probable, maybe, not likely, no. Pick one, because while I do know the answer to that question, I'm not going to specify at this point in the story. Sorry :p

Q: Did Sakura realize that it was Sasuke when she was healing him?

A: No she didn't. If you look back a chapter, it says that the sleeves of Tsunade's jacket were blocking her view of the patient's face. So she didn't know.

Q: Can you tell me a little more of the story?

A: Sorry, but I can't. As much as I'd like to, I don't want to spoil anyone. The only person who gets a sneak peek on the next chapter is my Editor in Chief, and even then, I'll only let her read one chapter ahead at a time. She's read up to chapter four even though I am currently working on chapter ten. The best way for you to find out what happens is to read the story as it's published.

For those of you who want to know when I update, it's roughly a week between chapters. I've got up to chapter nine typed so far, so it there should be periodic updates until I hit a slow spot. (Slow spot a.k.a. writers block). Luckily I haven't run into any so far. Anyways, I've rambled enough; here's chapter three. Enjoy!

P.S. This chapter is dedicated to Episode 221 of Naruto, which is supposed to come out tomorrow! I hope they get it subbed soon! Happy Valentines Day!

Chapter Three: An Offer

It wasn't until late the next morning that Sakura pushed open the doors to the hospital, feeling still drained from the other night. Exhaustedly she dragged her feet through the entrance, not really wanting to work that day.

"Good morning, Sakura-san," Shizune greeted as she approached the petal-haired girl, "Tsunade-sama is awaiting your presence in the medical office upstairs."

"Ohayo," Sakura yawned, the lack of sleep not helping her be rid of her exhaustion.

"I hope you slept well," Shizune said, leading Sakura along to the elevator, clutching a clipboard and stack of papers close to her, "I can't imagine that you had an easy time of it after last night. I'm amazed that you could remain so calm during the procedure."

Following Shizune as they entered the elevator, Sakura was too tired to even ask what the Hokage's assistant was talking about. The words themselves made sense, but she could not see how they applied to her. She had seen ninja in worse condition than the young man the previous night—she had seen ninja die as she continued to work on them, struggling to keep them alive even though she knew it was futile. Tsunade had always said that she had to recognize when to give up, but Sakura could not bear the thought of quitting. That aside, it was needless to say that she was not squeamish around blood or injuries, and she wondered why Shizune was so proud of her all of a sudden.

"I know that if it had been me in your position, I wouldn't be able to handle it," the said assistant continued as the elevator rumbled slowly upward, "Anyways, Tsunade-sama is filling out the paperwork in the office down the hall. Please come with me."

Sakura, who had opened her mouth to ask what Shizune was going on about, shut it as the elevator doors opened and she was required to match the young woman's brisk pace as they marched down the linoleum hallway.

Understandably, Sasuke woke to darkness, but despite the fact that he knew that he would not wake to anything else, it still took him a little time to register what had happened to him. He first noticed the dull throbbing in his eyes, which he supposed was an improvement to the burning pain he had felt as he took the kunai to his face. His left arm was tingling slightly, but it was no longer hurting. Dimly he tried to remember what happened, and where he was.

He remembered the pain clearly—he was unsure of how he had been tortured, but he knew that he had been put under the method by some strange jutsus he had never heard of. Whatever it had been, he felt lucky that he had even survived it, as it had hurt so badly. After that he could dimly remember being half-carried, half-dragged into the forest and left out there to die. The memories after that were a little hazy, but he recalled the cherry tree—the smell was so strong, seeming like a haven amidst all the agony he felt, and lying under the trunk, he prepared himself to die. Much to his surprise he found himself alive, lying in a foreign location, having no recollection of how he got there or why he had been rescued.

The pungent aroma that was in the air was far from pleasant, but it was enough for him to realize he was most likely in a hospital, or some other medical facility, which would account for the sudden disappearance of his wounds. But while the information was somewhat helpful, it still did not help him understand where the medical facility was, or even what country he was in.

Sasuke sat up slowly, trying to gather information from what he knew of the surrounding area, which is when he discovered that his right wrist was shackled to the hospital bed. He scowled—this meant that wherever he was he had been taken hostage by people who knew he was a wanted criminal. There were a number of people that could

have captured him; he tried to narrow his options down by trying to remember where the base had been located, and how far away they would have most likely dragged him, but his memory drew up a blank. He growled, remembering Orochimaru's order to have important information erased from his memory. Apparently the location of the base had been part of said important information—he supposed it was obvious, but it still frustrated him that he could not remember.

He dimly knew that it was somewhere in the Fire Country, and it was most likely that he had been dumped somewhere there. And judging by the fact that he was bound, no matter how simplistically, it was probably safe to assume that he was in Konoha. Lying back down on the bed that he had been laid in, he grumbled darkly in his mind—the Village Hidden in the Leaves was the last place he had hoped to end up, and it was a great inconvenience for him, considering that even if he could escape the hospital in his condition, he would most likely not make it to out of the village.

Sasuke listened carefully—he would have to wait until someone came and checked on him before he could get some answers. He lay quietly, knowing his expression probably looked grim, but there was little he could do about his situation—the only thing he could do was wait.

Sakura and Shizune flung open the doors to the small room where Tsunade was awaiting them patiently. The room in question was a small lounge, which the medical staff hung around during their breaks—Sakura had only been there a couple times, because normally she was too busy to take it easy. When they entered Tsunade could be seen sitting on a couch and bent over some paperwork that she had spread out on a coffee table.

"Ah, Sakura," Tsunade looked up from the form she was filling out in front of her, taking a sip of sake as she did so.

The Hokage indicated that Sakura should take a seat, while Shizune stood attentively next to the doorway. Trying not to yawn, Sakura went and sat down comfortably on the couch across from Tsunade, uttering a quick "good morning".

"You must have been exhausted," Tsunade remarked, looking at Sakura's disheveled appearance. Her black clothes may have made her appear slightly more poised, but it also accented Sakura's fatigue, "I had expected that you would have refused to leave last night, or at least shown up at the crack of dawn this morning."

Sakura raised a tired eyebrow and inquired, "Tsunade-sama, why on earth would I want to stay here the entire night?"

Tsunade looked over at Sakura with an astonished look on her face, "I thought you would have been worried about him."

"About the patient last night?" Sakura asked quizzically, peering at her mentor, "Is there any particular reason why I would be worried about him?"

Tsunade and Shizune looked at each other, before looking back to Sakura. "Didn't you recognize who we were treating last night?" Tsunade sounded surprised.

A little seed of worry sprouted somewhere in her dim and tired mind, where Inner Sakura was half-asleep. Had it been someone she knew? What if it had been her father? Or her older brother, and she hadn't realized? Attentiveness began to return as she spoke her response.

"No...the sleeves of your jacket blocked my view of his face," she said, a frown creasing her weary brow.

Tsunade put down her pen and brushed her bangs out of her eyes, then proceeded to put her fingertips together in a thoughtful manner. "So all this time you didn't know who—? No wonder you left and

slept in! Oh well, it probably was for the better that you didn't know... you probably would have been unable to rest otherwise."

Sakura bit her lip nervously, her drowsiness quickly fading, "Are you going to tell me who was unconscious and dying last night?"

A deep sigh. "Perhaps you had better sit down—" Tsunade started to say.

"I'm already sitting down," Sakura interrupted.

"Oh, right...well..." the Hokage took a sip from her sake, "This may come as a shock to you, Sakura, but the young man we were working so hard to keep alive last night...was Sasuke."

Sakura suddenly leapt to her feet, her eyes wide and her throat going dry. Any grogginess still left was instantly evaporated, "Was?"

" /s/ " Tsunade corrected hurried as she saw the look of horror on Sakura's face, "Heavens, Sakura, we didn't work so hard only to let him d—Shizune!"

Sakura had made a dash for the door, but as the Fifth Hokage called out to her assistant, Shizune stepped in front of her and blocked her path. Sakura skidded to a halt and glared at Shizune, then turned her head and glared at Tsunade.

"Let me pass," she growled through clenched teeth, her voice fierce and her fists balled, "Let me go see Sasuke-kun!"

"Sit down, Sakura," Tsunade ordered sharply.

"No."

"Sakura!" Tsunade's voice was strict now, a warning tone concealed in the edge of her intonation.

Reluctantly, and completely against her will, Sakura trudged back to the couch and plopped herself onto it, glowering at her teacher.

"Why can't I see him?" she demanded impatiently.

"Oh, you can," Tsunade replied patiently, lacing her fingers together and resting them lazily behind her head, "It's just that there are a couple of important things I need to discuss with you first."

"Like what?" Sakura demanded. She knew that she should be showing more respect for the sannin, but Inner Sakura had gotten the better of her and was now going on a tirade, shoving her Outer Sakura aside.

"Sakura, you firstly have to realize that the Sasuke lying in that bed on the second floor may not be the Sasuke that you knew as a genin," Tsunade replied with admirable patience, "It may very well be Orochimaru down there, though the preliminary tests that we ran when he was unconscious seem to suggest otherwise. Additionally, Orochimaru would have most likely made an attempt to escape by now. But you still must be wary.

"The second thing you must be aware of is that Sasuke has to be interrogated before we can even begin to treat him like he is a regular patient in this hospital who is permitted guests, flowers, and the like.

"The third thing is that Sasuke suffered a major injury to his face, which I expect you could not see from your angle."

Sakura was suddenly anxious, "Facial injuries?"

"I managed to clean up the most of it, and there should be no scars left over from the incident, however..." Tsunade unlaced her fingers from behind her head, and rested them on her knees, bending over and looking Sakura straight in the eye, "Sakura...Sasuke is blind."

There was a very long, silent pause. A small trembling began to tingle in Sakura's fingers, and then her arms started to shake. Her eyes started to brim with tears, "Is there nothing you can do to heal him?"

Tsunade shook her head slowly from side to side in an apologetic and melancholy manner, "Nothing with my healing abilities. I wish I could help him, but there is nothing more I can do for him."

"How bad is it?"

"The eyes themselves will heal perfectly, however the sight may never return to them," was her mentor's grim response.

" *May never return,*" Sakura echoed faintly, "What are his chances?"

"We're talking less than four percent," Tsunade replied, "And the odds of him using the Sharingan ever again are even less."

Sakura fell silent, staring at her hands lying in her lap. What had happened to Sasuke? Who had done this to him? How could someone as who was as skilled as he was become blinded? Sadness washed over her as she sympathized with him, so much that it hurt her to think of the suffering he must have gone through, the frustration of losing his vision.

"Lastly there is the matter of him being an S-rank wanted criminal, Sakura," Tsunade continued, "No matter how much you care for him, he is a traitor to Konoha and must atone for his crimes."

Sakura looked up sharply, "Tsunade-sama, must he be punished? Isn't losing his sight—and the Sharingan with it—punishment enough?"

Tsunade put her fingertips together again and closed her eyes, "There is something I can do. If I sent him to our prison, he would most likely be picked off and killed because of his disadvantage. But if he is co-operative in the interrogation, I may be able to lighten his sentence—and depending on how helpful he is, I might be able to be rid of it completely."

"That's good," Sakura smiled a little to herself.

"Sasuke also needs adjust to his current state," Tsunade said, turning and looking out the window, "in the event that he refuses to co-operate and needs to work off his punishment."

"Meaning?" Sakura asked, frowning slightly.

"We're talking rehabilitation," Tsunade replied, "I am going to great lengths to help Sasuke so that perhaps we can be rid of Orochimaru for good—perhaps I am dedicating too much time to helping him, but I think that it is the best course of action to take. However, it will be difficult for me to find a medical ninja who will come off work to help him. There is no way to deal with this simply."

"Is there any particular reason why you are bringing these things to my attention?" Sakura asked wearily, wanting to go see Sasuke.

"Yes. There are two reasons: one, I want you to understand the situation fully so you do not pull a Naruto and come bursting into my office, slamming your fists down on my desk, and demanding why Sasuke is being treated as he is," Tsunade explained, looking over at her pupil passively, "Two, I want you to be the one to interrogate him."

Sakura looked at her teacher in an aghast manner, "What?! Why me?"

"Don't worry—the interrogation will be torture-free, he has suffered enough torture already," Tsunade replied, waving her hand dismissively before Sakura could continue to freak out, "What I was hoping, was a state of mental interrogation—in which you will find out what happened to him, afterwards he will be submitted to further questioning by someone else. But at the moment, you know Sasuke better than anyone in this village, and while you haven't seen him in a long time, there may be aspects, goals and priorities that haven't changed over time. You can use those against him. Also, he may not realize where he is still—if he knows, confirm his suspicions. If he doesn't know, then you will be the best one to cover it up."

"I don't understand, Sasuke knows me," Sakura replied, "Won't he realize who's talking to him?"

"No, he shouldn't," Tsunade replied, "He has heard me and Shizune before, and will most likely recognize us, however you haven't spoken with him in years. Your voice is no longer that of an adolescent, but that of a young woman. Just do your best, but in the even that you can't get any cooperation out of him, I will have Morino Ibiki, or some ANBU take over."

Sakura closed her eyes. She did not like the idea of having to fool Sasuke, but she also clearly remembered the nerve-wracking chuunin exam that Morino Ibiki had put the genin through—she had to survive it twice since she had taken the exam a second time—and was even less comfortable in letting him interrogate Sasuke. And she had no idea how the ANBU would treat him. Unless she accepted Tsunade's request, she would probably also be forbidden to see Sasuke until he had been through all the interrogation procedures.

"I will do it," she resigned with a profound sigh.

"That's a good girl," Tsunade praised absently, taking a sip of her sake, which had been forgotten for the last little bit.

"But—"

Tsunade looked up with curiosity, and lowered the sake from her lips, "But...?"

"I want to be the one who rehabilitates Sasuke-kun."

There was a drawn out silence and Sakura stared at her teacher with fierce determination, letting her know that she would not hear otherwise. The silence was broken by the Hokage's heavy sigh.

"It will not be easy."

"I realize that," Sakura replied, crossing her arms defiantly, "And I. Don't. Care."

Tsunade closed her eyes before replying in a resigning tone. "Very well then," she rubbed her temples slowly, "But he is a criminal and traitor, I will not have you calling him by the suffix '-kun', understood?"

Sakura set her jaw, "Take me to see Sasuke now."

It was only an hour since Sasuke had woken up and finally after what seemed like an age, someone came to check on his condition. The door slid open noisily and then was shut with the same amount of racket. Soft, tentative footsteps approached, and there was a small screech on the floor as a chair was drawn forth. The person could be heard settling down on the chair and there was a slight rustling of papers. After a moment, the visitor cleared their throat and Sasuke determined that the owner of the voice was female, most likely a nurse.

"Where am I?" Sasuke demanded harshly at his visitor, "and why have I been restrained?"

"I am not at the liberty to tell you," the woman replied, her voice sounding vaguely memorable, but he could not put a name to it.

"I am in Konoha, aren't I?" he replied shortly.

"I'm sorry but I cannot—" the woman began again; her voice was young, probably early to mid twenties, but that was only a guess.

"Don't lie to me," he grunted sourly, "I'm not stupid."

There was a short pause, then a weighty sigh, "You, Uchiha Sasuke, are in the Village Hidden in the Leaves, better known as Konoha. Currently you are in a room in our hospital on the second floor—a building I am sure you are familiar with."

He gave a small 'tch' noise in reply, "I expected as much. Release me, and leave me alone. I have no more dealings with Konoha."

The answer he received was firm and curt, sounding completely alien from anyone he had known in Konoha, making him doubt the familiarity he had sensed earlier, "Uchiha, you are a traitor to Konoha and a S-ranked wanted criminal in the Land of Fire. You are in no position to be making demands, let alone expecting to be released."

Frustrated, he clenched his fists tightly, "What do you want with me?"

"You have committed crimes against this village, and you are to atone for them. I also am asked to inquire as to how you received the injuries you did," the woman was terse.

"I don't have to tell you anything," he replied coldly, turning his face away from the woman's voice.

"Considering that many people—the jounin team that found you, our best medical staff, and the Hokage herself—worked late into the night to keep you alive, you could repay their kindness and hard work by telling us how you acquired your wounds," the woman's voice sounded displeased, "Or at least be grateful."

"Why would I care if you kept me alive?" he replied, "I didn't ask you to."

"You are an avenger," came the simple reply.

It was a basic answer, but the words caused Sasuke to stiffen slightly, his stomach clenching unpleasantly.

"Kinda hard to avenge your clan if you're dead too."

Sasuke's displeasure deepened, but outwardly he pretended not to care. The woman's knowledge about him disturbed him—how had she known of his desire for revenge? He was doubtful that the majority of the village was aware of the circumstances under which

he left, but he was certain he had never met this woman before in his life.

"Why do you want to know how I was injured?" he asked suspiciously.

The voice was patient and kind, beginning to sound recognizable again to his ears, but still the name eluded him, and he could not picture a face. "We want to know because we want to be able to treat your further. It is easier to heal someone when we know the nature of the injury. We are trying to help you."

He snorted with cynical amusement, "You were the one who said I'm an S-ranked criminal."

"That may be, but if you are helpful, it will benefit you greatly," the nurse told him, "The Hokage is willing to make a deal with you. We will help you become accustomed to your condition and do everything in our power to help you return to your strength; we will also be willing to lighten your sentence considerably if you will assist us."

"What kind of information do you want from me?"

"Information on Orochimaru and his followers mostly; the more information you can give, the lighter your sentence will become, and you may even be pardoned of your crimes," the young woman remarked, "I would accept this generous offer if I were you. There are endless benefits and at a small price. Refuse the terms, and your original punishment will be carried out—you will be executed."

The woman's voice wavered somewhat as she told him his sentence, and he sensed a touch of familiarity though he still could not place it. He brushed it aside however as he considered her words; it was true that the deal had countless benefits for him, and it was at a small price. Orochimaru had erased parts of his memory, but he could still recall clearly other information that Kabuto must not

have deemed 'important'. The deal was tempting, and it showed that they trusted him to some extent—he lowered his guard slightly.

"I was tortured," he said finally, admitting it stung his pride a little, "by Orochimaru."

There was some quick scribbling on what he assumed was a clipboard before the scribbling stopped, "How?"

"I don't know."

"How were you—" the nurse stumbled over her words, but cleared her throat, "—blinded?"

"I was blinded by a kunai," was his response, but he refused to say more on the matter.

"I see," the woman replied, "Thank you. I will inform Tsunade-sama that you have accepted the deal, so we can start your treatment."

There was a scraping on the floor and the creak of a chair as the woman stood to depart.

"Wait," he called out, and he heard her pause, "In what condition is my vision?"

There was a long silence before the nurse spoke, her voice serious, yet laced with an undertone of despair. "I won't lie to you Sasuke," she sighed, using his first name for the first time throughout the conversation, "Your eyes will heal perfectly, but the chance of your vision returning is just under four percent, and the use of your Sharingan is lower still."

He felt a grimness wash over him as he heard her soft footsteps receding. He had thought as much, Kabuto had said something similar, but he did not want to trust the cowardly medic's word. Unfortunately, Kabuto had been right.

"Thank you," he said quietly as the young woman opened the door.

A quiet and wavering reply came to him just before the door shut, "I'm sorry."

Outside the room, Sakura walked slowly to the elevator, and it wasn't until the doors had shut that she burst into tears.

A/N: That's chapter three for you, right there. Hope you liked it very muchly. The next few chapters is where the story really begins to take place, so be anticipating that :)

So, at the beginning of the chapter, I answered questions from the reviewers, now it's my turn to ask you guys some questions. There are only three, give me your answers in a review.

Question 1: Should I make the chapters longer? Up until now, I've managed to keep consistent in length with my chapters...they're all around 10 pages, give or take one page, which—for me—is odd. If you think that I should make the chapters longer, I have no problems with that—but only if you want.

Question 2: Traditionally, girls in Japan wore beautiful outfits made out of silk called kimonos, no? So, here's the question: what were the outfits called that the guys wore? I've asked half a dozen people who used to know, but can't remember :p

Question 3: I always hear Naruto saying "dattebayo" when I'm watching the subbed episodes, and it's driving me crazy. Can someone please tell me what "dattebayo" means?

Thank you very much!

Drieldwin

Chapter 4

A/N: You know what's awesome? It's February 15, the day after I post chapter three, and I had Chinese food for supper that night. I cracked open a fortune cookie, and it was the creepiest, most awesome thing, (and I'm not making this up). The fortune read: *'You will receive unexpected support over the next week. Accept it graciously.'* And it came true! You guys have been so supportive of my story, and thank you very much!

Also, thank you everyone for answering my questions—as a result the following has been noted:

-Chapters have been said to be "just the right length", and a few people saying make them longer. As a result, they will be lengthened to about twelve pages instead of ten, but that will only happen around chapter nine or so, seeing as everything in between now and chapter nine is kinda written in stone. So, longer chapters coming eventually!

-For those of you who asked me to inform you when I found out: girls wear kimonos and guys wear yukatas (hakamas are different than what I was looking for.)

-Sorry for not being more specific, but I got a question about the ages. I always figured the Sasuke left the village roughly a year after becoming a genin, so in this story, they are all **around sixteen**. And since it's set in springtime, that would be after Sakura's birthday, so she just turned seventeen.

-Thank you for the explanations on dattebayo! It clears it up considerably on my part—and it also explains why in the English version of the anime, Naruto is always saying: "Believe it!" (Which got really annoying after a while.)

Thank you again, and I will no longer deprive you of this chapter.

Chapter Four: The Unforgotten Memory

"You did well, Sakura," Tsunade said comfortingly as she patted her distraught pupil on the back, "He didn't know it was you, though, did he?"

Sakura inhaled with a shudder; her sobs had made her breathing pattern irregular, "N-no, he didn't realize a-at all. I-I feel terrible."

"If it makes you feel any better, I told you to not reveal your identity, so you didn't have any choice," Tsunade reminded her gently, "Sasuke understands the importance of obeying orders."

Sakura nodded dumbly and sniffed a couple times. Shizune approached her and handed her a handkerchief.

"Don't worry, Sakura-san," she said comfortingly, "We are going to do everything we can for Sasuke."

Sakura took a deep breath and calmed herself; Inner Sakura was screeching 'Damn right we'll do everything we can!' within her mind. Clutching the kerchief in her hand tightly, Sakura stood up slowly.

"We're going back to see him now, right?" she asked, trying to get control over herself again, "I think I'm ready to go now."

Tsunade nodded slowly, "Alright then, we're going now. Shizune, please clean up the papers here for me and go and grab my medical books on the human eye and bring them back here."

"Hai, Tsunade-sama," Shizune gave a curt nod.

"Come, Sakura," Tsunade said as she left the room, her back straight, her face serious.

Quickly Sakura scampered after her, and wiped her eyes with the handkerchief as they waited for the elevator. It hurt to see Sasuke in such reduced circumstances, and she knew it must be difficult for him; being an Uchiha, whose bloodline ability was the Sharingan, he relied heavily on this vision. She felt her heart go out to him, wanting to help him any way she could.

They stepped off the elevator and Sakura tucked away Shizune's handkerchief, filling herself with calm. If she was going to help with Sasuke's rehab, she needed to be strong for him—she couldn't waste time crying.

Tsunade led the way to the room and Sakura followed quietly behind, keeping her head held high, and her shoulders back. Tsunade paused at the door when they arrived in front of Sasuke's room and looked at Sakura, who nodded in return. Tsunade opened the door and entered, her pupil only a step behind.

Sasuke had not moved at all since Sakura had last seen him; his head was turned away from them, facing a window that he could not see and probably didn't even know the existence of. He looked so helpless lying in the bed, his clothes in tatters and his hair still stiff with blood; a clean white bandage was wrapped around his head, covering his eyes. Sakura looked grimly at him and clenched her fists determinedly.

"My apprentice tells me that you have agreed to the terms which we have offered to you," Tsunade said, her hands on her hips.

"I have," came his straightforward reply, turning his head towards the sound of Tsunade's voice, "But you should know, there may be some things I can not tell you. Before I was tortured and left to die, Orochimaru had parts of my memory erased in case I survived."

"I see," Tsunade replied, but Sakura could tell that she didn't believe him—after all, why erase the memory of someone who was expected to die? "We shall see how much memory remains, but that will have to wait until you've regained your strength."

"Hn."

"To get right to the point, your eyes have not completely healed yet," Tsunade stated bluntly, "You will have to go through a daily healing process with a skilled medical ninja, during that time you will also be working on rehabilitation. We have an offer of three choices of which type of rehabilitation you will work with. The medical ninja who will heal you will also help you become accustomed to that choice and eventually will leave when you become more independent."

"What are the choices?" Sasuke asked passively, his facial expression unreadable.

"First choice is to get the Inuzuka clan to select a reliable animal that will be your seeing-eye dog," Tsunade told him patiently.

"I don't like animals," Sasuke said brusquely.

"The second choice would be to train you with a cane."

"Out of the question," Sasuke turned his head so that he was facing the ceiling. Sakura knew the concept of using a cane was unthinkable for Sasuke, and it would harm his pride immensely.

"Then you have chosen the third and final choice," Tsunade said, closing her eyes, "Once you have finished with the healing of your eyes, the medic who set aside time for you will also be taking up residence with you, teaching you how to rely on sound, smell and touch in order to get by. When you are comfortable with this on your own, the medic will leave, and you will be left by yourself."

There was a long pause from Sasuke, "Very well."

"I have already assigned our most skilled medic to be your caretaker. Until you are able to live on your own, she will assist you, guide you, and teach you," Tsunade's voice was gravely serious, "Only under certain circumstances will you be allowed to leave her side—she will

also be serving as a kind of supervisor, monitoring your behavior. Consider it a sort of probation, if you will."

Another pause, "Who have you assigned?"

Tsunade turned to Sakura and gave her a proud smile, "My apprentice, and this hospital's most talented medic, Haruno Sakura."

Sasuke visibly stiffened at Tsunade's words; he turned his head away from them again, facing the window that he could not see. Sakura frowned uncertainly; bringing a finger to her lip she bit it nervously. Sasuke would most likely reject the prospect of her overseeing his rehabilitation.

"I refuse," Sasuke muttered, and Tsunade frowned at his words.

"Sakura is the one most capable for the job; aside from myself, there is no one better than her," she spoke severely, "You have already chosen the third option, and I will hold you to it. Sakura is to help you recover, whether you like it or not."

At that moment, Sakura was thankful for her sensei's stubborn will. She knew that if she had told Sasuke herself, she would have been unable to cope with his refusal. Taking a deep breath, Sakura stepped forward, her fist clenched in determination.

"Sasuke, I will not accept your refusal," she said fiercely, "I have been assigned to this task and I will stay with it. You are my patient, and as of right now, I am responsible for you."

Another long pause blanketed the room, lasting longer than any of the others had—if Sasuke had not known of her presence before then, he did not show it. He was thinking it over, Sakura knew, but no matter what he felt about the situation, she refused to give up. She would see him through this.

"Even after so much time has passed," Sasuke said finally, "you're just as annoying, Sakura."

Her fist slackened a little, and her body relaxed, Tsunade looked over at her to see how she would react to her response, but she merely closed her eyes and smiled to herself—she knew that it was his way of saying yes.

"If I have to, I will remind you of how annoying I actually am," she retorted haughtily, but a playful grin was on her lips.

It was because Sasuke's face was turned away from them that they did not see the change in his facial expression—they did not see the corner of his mouth curl slightly upwards into a small, amused smile.

When Sakura and Tsunade returned to the office on the fifth floor, Shizune had dutifully fulfilled the Hokage's request. All the papers that she had been working on were cleared and a stack of about five medical textbooks was sitting on the coffee table. Shizune was sitting patiently on a couch, holding Ton Ton in her lap; she looked up at the both of them when they entered.

"How did it go?" she asked, standing up abruptly, causing Ton Ton to tumble to the ground with some indignant squeals, but Shizune didn't notice.

"It went better than I expected to—though his response isn't exactly what I was expecting," Tsunade replied, bending down and patting an irritated Ton Ton who had run up to her, "I'm also surprised that he was so willing to consent."

"I assure you, Tsunade-sama," Sakura emphasized once again, "his words were that of agreement."

Tsunade straightened up again and looked at Sakura doubtfully, "Well, it wouldn't be how I would have said it."

Sakura shrugged lightly, a cheerful grin on her face, "That's the way Sasuke is."

"Well, alright," Tsunade responded, still sounding dubious.

"As for willing cooperation...I told him that his punishment for betraying the village was death," Sakura stated quietly, "He has a certain goal he wants to achieve, and I know that he will refuse to die before he meets that goal. I thought telling him that death was his punishment was the best way to convince him to accept the deal."

"Hm, well I did tell you to manipulate him in any way to get him to reveal information," Tsunade mused at Sakura's explanation, "It's a good story, and we'll keep that up. His punishment for betraying Konoha is 'death'. It should work as a good story for a while at least. —Anyways, thank you, Shizune, for bringing the textbooks here. Sakura, you recall our studies on the properties of the human eye?"

Sakura nodded, "We didn't spend that much time on it though, I can't remember much."

"Right now I'm having Sasuke cleaned up, which might take a while, all things considered," Tsunade told her pupil, heading over the coffee table and picking up the textbook on the top of the stack, "While you wait, I want you to review the human eye and try to regain your understanding of it. Sasuke's treatment is basic healing, but it works better if you know where to focus the chakra."

Sakura wandered over to the stack of books and picked up the second one on the stack, which was titled *The Basic Principles and Anatomy of the Human Eye* .

"You had better get started," Tsunade responded, putting back the textbook she had, "I have other matters to attend to—I'll be in my office if you need me. I've made arrangements for you to be notified when Sasuke is ready to begin treatment."

"Alright," she replied, sitting down on the couch across from Shizune, "Thank you for letting me do this, Tsunade-sama."

"Don't thank me," was her reply, "Could I have convinced you otherwise?"

Sakura smiled, "No."

"I thought not," Tsunade grinned, "Come Shizune, let's see how many hours of paperwork you have found for me to work on."

Lost in thought, Sakura hardly notice the two women and pig leave the room as thought of her situation. Apprehension was coursing through her; it was understandable that she was nervous. Sasuke had never particularly liked her—well, he didn't seem to particularly like anyone—and she was not sure how well he'd warm up to the state of affairs, if at all. She knew his stubborn pride and independent nature would conflict terribly with the treatment, and he would most likely refuse all help. Of course that would be impossible to work with—she needed to make him understand that he was not longer independent, no matter how much it would hurt him. The question was *how* to make him understand?

She cracked open the textbook, looking at the table of contents for indications of what chapter would be most useful to review. She turned to a page somewhere near the middle of the book—her mind became split in two, both parts still aware of what the other was doing. Outer Sakura was reading the book rested in her lap and feeding the information to Inner Sakura, committing it to memory. Inner Sakura, meanwhile, was coming up with a plan in order to get Sasuke to cooperate, and giving the details to outer Sakura. It was in this unique way that she could multi-task and be able to remember things better than other people could, which is why she probably graduated at the top of her class when they became genin.

With a plan being formed in her mind and information being branded into it, Sakura prepared herself for Sasuke's rehabilitation.

Sasuke stood in the shower stall, letting the cool water rush over him, his one hand braced against the wall. The wetness ran through

his hair, causing the dried blood to become soaked and wash out. More water was running over his face, and he kept his eyes squinted shut tightly—they were already stinging from being injured, and he did not want any droplets to increase that pain.

The two medical ninja, who had come to his room shortly after the Fifth Hokage and Sakura had departed, helped him get undressed and into the shower, and were now waiting outside the bathroom for him to let them know when he was finished washing up. It had been a strange experience walking around blind as they helped him out of his bed—the whole world seemed to have lost its ups and downs and he became dizzy and lightheaded. He had his hand resting against the wall of the shower in order to give him a reference point in which to relate his senses. It would only probably be that way for a little while and he would get used to using his feet as a reference point to the world. He would be okay.

That last thought drew his mind to Sakura. Haruno Sakura... It hadn't been until her passionate statement that his suspicions were confirmed of someone else being in the room. That hadn't really surprised him—what had surprised him was that he finally recognized the voice from earlier that morning; it had been Sakura's. She had acted completely different from the Sakura he knew, and he was also surprised that she hadn't been sitting by his bedside already when he woke. She hadn't once put a 'kun' suffix after his name when she had spoken it. Perhaps she no longer cared for him in that way—it would definitely make rehabilitation more bearable if she didn't. The last thing he needed was Sakura fangirling during the whole thing.

He bent down and felt around on the floor for the shampoo he had been given before beginning to wash out the rest of the matted blood from his hair. He decided then that he would get well as quickly as he could, so that he did not have to put up with old acquaintances—he would give the Hokage any information he could and then leave Konoha once the procedure was over. He needed no business with Konoha or Orochimaru; they both would not be able to assist him in

his revenge because he was the only one who cared about avenging the Uchiha clan.

Reaching out he turned off the tap and the water came to a halt, a quiet dripping splashing onto the ground. Fumbling for the handle of the door to the stall he cursed his current state, but knew that he had had no other acceptable alternative. He stepped out of the shower and placed his hand on a stack of towels that had been put out for him; grabbing one, he wrapped it around his waist.

"Uchiha," one of the medical ninja's knocked on the door from outside, "Are you finished?"

"Aa," Sasuke replied, rubbing his hair dry with another towel from the pile.

He heard faintly, on the other side of the door, one medic say to the other: "Go tell Haruna Sakura that Uchiha Sasuke will be ready shortly for treatment."

He lowered the towel from his head and held the thick fabric in his hands; no matter what, he would get well, whether Sakura was the one who treated him or not.

Sakura placed her hand on the handle of the door to Sasuke's room, a small nervousness plaguing her. Having read up on the human eye and reviewing the what she already knew had helped a great deal, but she was still anxious—she did not want to make a mistake.

This was the first time that she would have taken care of someone with out her sensei's supervision. When Tsunade had praised her, and called her the best medical ninja next to herself, Sakura was immensely shocked and flattered. She had realized that she was coming along better than most people on staff, but she had always thought that there were many beyond her. Apparently not. Perhaps this is why Tsunade let her deal with Sasuke, because maybe there was something she could do to help that the Hokage herself couldn't.

After all, two days ago she had said the way that Sakura controlled her chakra was very effective for healing wounds. Sakura gripped the handle a little tighter before opening the entrance to the room.

Sasuke was back in the hospital bed, some new bandages wrapped over his eyes. His hair was damp and hung down away from his face due to the extra weight of the water, revealing a very incomprehensible expression. He was also no longer wearing the torn and tattered clothes that he had been garbed in that morning and was now wearing a simple cloth hospital gown.

"Good afternoon Sasuke," she said cheerfully, "I'm glad that they got you cleaned up."

"Hn," was the noise he made in reply.

"I trust you didn't have too much difficulty," Sakura continued, coming forward, putting her medical bag on the nightstand next to his bed.

"Can we save the pleasantries and get on with this?" he asked, his voice sounding irritated.

' I must have hit a sensitive spot by asking if he had trouble,' she thought nervously, biting her lip. Inner Sakura was beating her head against a wall.

"Very well," Sakura replied, changing her tone to a more serious one, "But if you won't get better overnight, Sasuke. This treatment demands a great amount of patience; I won't have you pushing yourself—it would most likely result in a longer rehab period."

"Hn."

Inwardly, Sakura sighed. She was hoping that Sasuke would be a little more—she couldn't find the word to describe it. Open, friendly, accepting? All those things were ridiculous to expect of Sasuke, but she was hoping that he would be a little cooperative to say the least. Depending on how this went, the plan that Inner Sakura had come

up with would or wouldn't be implemented. Worst-case scenario: she would resort to plan B.

"Sit up for me, please," Sakura ordered, pulling out a medical book and skimming a dog-eared page for some last-minute information that could help her.

He complied without complaint and sat in a cross-legged position on the mattress, his back straight and his shoulders back. Sakura was glad to see that he was no longer handcuffed to the bed as he rested his hands patiently on his lap. His posture spoke to Sakura, revealing his proud nature once again—this was a great blow to his ego, she thought to herself.

Reaching out she undid the bandage from the back of his head, slowly unwinding it until it fell away from his face. She wrapped it in a neat coil and set it down next to the book she had spread out on the table. She then walked over and sat down on the side of his bed, looking at his face.

To someone who did not understand the situation, it would appear that Sasuke was completely fine, and was just sitting with his eyes closed, but Sakura knew better. Tsunade had indeed done a good job on his face, as there were no marks or indications that suggested he had ever been slashed by a kunai, but she knew that behind his closed lids, his damaged eyes were concealed.

"Open your eyes, Sasuke," Sakura spoke firmly, but gently, trying not to hurt the prideful Uchiha.

Slowly he opened his eyes and Sakura noted the damage with grimness. There was severe damage to the cornea, and even though Tsunade had managed to partially seal the wound, the deep gash had crusted slightly shut and appeared extremely painful.

Sakura went and rummaged around inside her bag, procuring an ophthalmoscope. Sitting back down on the edge of the bed, she shone the light from it in each eye, comparing the injuries. There was

damage to the lens and iris in both eyes, but his inner eyes, from what she could tell, seemed to have sustained no damage at all. She put the ophthalmoscope aside, her renewed knowledge on the human eye allowing her to recognize what she must do.

Sakura stretched out with her hands and brushed some stray strands of hair out of the way before laying her fingertips on either side of his head. Sasuke's hands snapped up, seizing her wrists and tearing her hands away from his face.

"What are you doing?" he demanded, his voice angry.

Sakura glared at him, even though he could not see it. "I am trying to begin the healing procedure," she replied irritably, "If you don't mind, could you let go of my wrists?"

Slowly Sasuke's grip on her wrists loosened and he dropped his hands in his lap again. There was a trace of a scowl on his face; Sakura could tell he was distrustful of her, but there was nothing she could do about it. Again she raised her hands to his face and placed her fingertips on the different chakra points in his head, where the book had said they would be.

Focusing the chakra in her hands, she exerted it through her fingertips and onto Sasuke's skull, keeping close watch on the flow of chakra. She closed her eyes in concentration, moving the chakra over his eyes to the infected areas, using her powers as medical ninja to repair the torn tissues.

For half an hour she and Sasuke sat perfectly still, neither of them moving, the only movement that could be seen was the slow rise and fall of their chests as they breathed, and the wispy chakra that was glowing at Sakura's fingertips. After a few more minutes Sakura dropped her hands to her side, feeling drained. Healing something as delicate as the eye was very difficult and she now knew why Tsuande hadn't healed him completely the previous night—she had run out of expendable chakra.

"I'm finished," she said to Sasuke needlessly, "You may be feeling drowsy as a result of the process, so you should try and get some sleep."

"Hn," he replied as Sakura stood up from the bed and went and grabbed some fresh bandages.

She sat down behind him this time and wrapped the white bandages around his head, being careful around his eyes, not wanting to jar them. Sasuke waited patiently as she tied the bandage at the back, and didn't say anything as she stood up, packing away the book and the ophthalmoscope she had used.

"I'll come back in an hour and we'll begin the rehab," she told him as she slung the bag over her shoulder, feeling extremely tired herself, "If you need anything, call the nurse by using the red button on the right side of you, she should be able to tend to your needs until I come back."

She began to cross the room, ready to head up the lounge and take a needed nap—her chakra was still low from healing him the previous night, and she had not had a chance to replenish it completely. The process she had just completed had drained it even further, and she longed for some sleep.

"Sakura," Sasuke called out to her as she reached for the door handle.

Pausing, she turned back to look at him; he had lain back on the bed again and was facing the ceiling, "Yes Sasuke?"

"Why are you doing this for me?" he asked her, and she could hear an undertone of confusion in his demand, "Why are you helping me, when not that long ago it was you who pointed out that I was a criminal against this village?"

Sakura gave a sad smile, even though he could not see it. She tried to speak gently in a way that would paint a picture of her facial

expression, "You seem to have forgotten, Sasuke, the words I said to you on that day three years ago."

"I haven't forgotten," Sasuke said after a moment.

His words tugged at her heartstrings, touching her, "Then you should know why I'm doing this for you."

With that final word she exited the room, closing the door gently behind her.

A/N: Some of you might have noticed a lack in other characters, but don't worry, they'll come into the story in a bit—once word gets out that Sasuke's returned, and especially after he gets released from the hospital and Sakura takes up residence with him.

Just want to take the time to apologize for any grammatical errors. Sometimes they're so subtle, and I don't notice them x.x As far as spelling mistakes go, I am Canadian, so I do use Canadian spelling most of the time, and unless spellcheck autocorrects it, it'll most likely be floating around. (e.g. colour, favourite, behaviour, honour, neighbourhood, harbour, etc.)

Quick question: Can anyone tell me the age difference between Sasuke and Itachi? I always thought he was around twenty when he killed the clan, but I don't know, because that would make an age difference of 13 years. If anyone knows, please tell me! (It's somewhat vital for the story...don't want to get time twisted and mixed up.)

Drieldwin

P.S. Reviews are appreciated. -hint, hint, nudge, nudge- ;)

Chapter 5

A/N: What makes this story so fun to write is that Sasuke is blind, so I can no longer describe how things *look* when I'm writing from his perspective. When I describe things from his point of view, I always try and write it from how he hears it, or feels it. I don't use smell or taste as often, but throw them in when appropriate. It's lots of fun to write, and it gives me a whole different point of view on how things are. :)

I just finished watching episode 221 and OMG, it makes me **so** sad inside. (wants to cry) Especially that scene at the beginning with Sasuke—he's my favourite character. And my stomach has a natural tendency to clench weirdly when I sense an upcoming tragedy. (My knowledge of Naruto only extends as far as the anime goes so I don't know if something bad is going to happen to Sasuke...but my gut feeling tells me to be worried for him. ;.;

Anyways, on with the Sasuke torture! Uh...you didn't see anything.

Chapter Five: A Curse of Damaged Dignity

It took a while for sleep to claim Sasuke, his mind kept toying with what Sakura had said to him before she left the room. The memory was in fact vivid in his head: her trying to convince him to stay in Konoha, or at least take her with him. She had promised that she would do anything for him, anything that she could do to help; shortly afterwards she found herself unconscious and lying on a cold stone bench, courtesy of himself. Her words had touched him, but despite that, he knew what she asked was impossible. Her heart was in Konoha, and he had planned on never returning, something that would have torn her.

Even though he had been gone so long from the Village Hidden in the Leaves, it seemed that time had not faded her memory of her promise, nor had her love for him grown any fainter. Yet she was different from the girl that was left behind on that bench; she was no longer clingy or overly friendly with him. In fact, she had been rather cold to him when she was questioning him earlier that day and was quite blunt. Perhaps she held some resentment towards him for leaving, but it didn't matter to him, he didn't concern himself with Sakura's feelings.

To say that he cared nothing for Sakura would be a lie—despite her annoying fangirling, she had become a close friend to him, as close as Naruto and Kakashi had been. Maybe it was good that Sakura was the one who would rehabilitate him opposed to someone he didn't know, but that contradicted his wish not associate with old acquaintances. Sasuke grumbled to himself and rolled over onto his side, feeling a little grouchy. His back was sore and he didn't know why, also his eyes still hurt a little from opening them up so that Sakura could heal them.

Drowsiness overcame and claimed him as he was still considering his situation, his thoughts conflicting, and his resolve undetermined.

Sakura knocked once on the door to Sasuke's room before entering uninvited. The nap had replenished her immediate energy reserve, though she knew she would need a full night's sleep before she could call herself completely refreshed. Sasuke turned his head towards her as she entered, his face emotionless.

"Did you sleep?" she asked him, not wanting to have to deal with a grouchy Uchiha.

"Aa," he replied, sitting upright, "My back is hurting."

Sakura smiled to herself and made a slight tutting noise, "I'm not surprised—you were sitting so rigidly when I was healing you earlier.

You don't have to be so stiff, it would probably be better if you tried to relax."

"I see," he replied, and Sakura mentally winced at the irony of his words.

"Well," she said cheerfully, "It's not good for one to be bedridden for too long when they are able to walk. We're going to walk around for a bit, to stretch your legs a little."

After giving a brisk nod, Sasuke hung his legs over the edge of the bed and stood up, wobbling slightly. He held his one arm out to steady himself, and the other held the side of his head, as if trying to stop something spinning inside his head. He looked dizzy and disoriented and Sakura was not the least bit surprised, having read something of the sort when she was reviewing earlier. Walking up to him she took his one arm and steadied him.

"What are you doing?" he demanded in an irritated tone.

Sasuke was a good six inches taller than her now, and as he turned to face her, a frown on his face, anyone else would have been intimidated. That infamous glare that he had was hidden behind his bandage, but even though Sakura could imagine it in her mind, she knew him better than that to feel threatened.

"I'm helping you," she replied with patience, "You are not yet used to standing on your own, let alone being able to distinguish your surroundings without sight."

' *Plan A,* ' Inner Sakura reviewed in her mind patiently, having expected a reaction like this from Sasuke, '*Be reasonable; explain the situation and try to make him understand.*'

"I can manage fine on my own," Sasuke stated curtly, "I do not need you clinging to my arm."

"Don't be ridiculous, Sasuke," she replied, equally as curt, "There is no way that you'll get very far."

"I can manage," he growled, shrugging his arm out of her grasp, not permitting her to grab his arm again. Sakura sighed.

' Plan A: Failed.' Inner Sakura reported in frustration, hoping to at least keep the first plan going for a *bit* longer, *'Plan B: Let him have his way; let cruel reality knock some common sense into him, damaging his ego. Afterwards, assistance should not be refused.'*

"Alright then, Sasuke, have it your way," Sakura said, taking a step back from him, "After you."

A suspicious frown crossed his face, but undaunted, Sasuke walked proudly towards the door. Sakura could tell that he was having trouble with balance, as his mind was unaccustomed to having the feeling of the ground beneath his feet as a reference point. He was trying his best to hide it, and she watched with grim amusement as he walked in a wobbly pattern across the room. Actually she was somewhat impressed by his determination, but she knew that regardless of how determined he was, he would be unable to manage on his own at this point. She was proven right when instead of walking through the open doorway, Sasuke crashed instead into the doorframe.

Concernedly she approached him, but he waved her off as she tried to ask him about his head, which he was hanging onto. She crossed her arms stubbornly as he made it past the doorway and into the hall. This time he was a bit smarter, and put his hand against the wall for support. His balance improved instantly and he strode down the hall holding his head up in a dignified matter. Sakura followed after him.

"You're doing better than I thought," she remarked in a tone that clearly said that she was mocking him.

He snorted at her remark and increased his pace, trying to prove to her that he could manage. It was then that his hand ran out of wall as the hall divided up into an intersection. The sudden lack of wall caused him to tumble over sideways around the corner.

"Watch out for the corner, Sasaki," Sakura remarked, shaking her head at his behavior, feeling bad for him, but knowing that she shouldn't let it show.

Pulling himself up off the ground he dusted himself off.

"I was hoping to go out to the gardens; some fresh air will do you good," she told him, trying to approach him again but he flinched away. She shrugged helplessly, "We'll just follow the hall you just discovered and take the elevator."

Sasuke braced his hand on the wall again and followed her instructions. Sakura shook her head slowly behind his back, keeping one step behind him; Tsunade would probably be unhappy with how she was treating her patient, but she knew it was good for Sasuke's hard head.

He reached the elevator without incident and pushed the down button to emphasize his accomplishment; he turned and gave Sakura a triumphant smirk.

"I'm over here," she said from his other side, as the elevator door opened. A smirk of her own decorated her lips as a low growl was emitted from Sasuke. Following her into the elevator he leaned up against the wall, his arms crossed. He said nothing to her when door opened again and he walked out—promptly running into a nurse who was waiting for the elevator on the main floor.

"Watch out for the nurse who's waiting for the elevator," Sakura informed her patient as Sasuke mumbled an apology to the poor woman and stood up again.

"Which way is the garden?" he snapped at her after she was done helping the nurse to her feet.

"Over in that direction," she said pointing off to her left.

Since she was standing on Sasuke's left, her head was turned towards him—to the right—and he mistook the direction of her voice as the direction of the garden, which is what Sakura had intended. She let him take a few steps towards the reception desk before she called out to him.

"It's the other way."

Sakura rolled her eyes as he turned abruptly about and stormed past her, muttering a long string of colourful words as he went. Amused, Sakura watched as Sasuke walked dizzily across the foyer, not having any walls nearby in which he could reference his direction. She walked after him, staying a step behind just to make sure he didn't gravely injure himself.

It was only as he took the first step outwards over the small set of stairs that Sakura spoke out, "There's a slight dip, three stairs deep."

As predicted, Sasuke was again picking himself off the ground and dusting himself off.

"Just a bit farther," she said brightly as she walked past and through the automatic doors.

Sasuke came up behind her, still seeming rather dizzy. She sighed inwardly, he sure was stubborn—she was hoping he would admit defeat by now. Oh well, obvious he hadn't been humiliated enough in order to ask for her assistance.

"We'll just walk along the path for a short while, okay?" she told him, and then added with deliberate emphasis, " *You seem to be having difficulty* , and I don't want you to *strain yourself* ."

His facial expression was livid, but Sakura shook her head, smiling slightly. Taking great strides forward, Sasuke trudged onwards, not paying any heed to Sakura. Knowing that he would not get that far, she just simply watched him from behind.

What made the gardens of the hospital so unique was not the types of plants they had there, but more the wonderful exterior decorating that had been implemented. The garden was built on a slope, because the hospital was backing onto a hill, and the path did not continue straight, but divided into two, splitting directly left and right. The paths then wound down and through the gardens, where the patients who were recovering could enjoy the stepped flowerbeds.

Having noted that, Sakura watched as Sasuke stumbled onto the fork in the road, lose his balance because of the loss in his sense of direction, and tumble neatly over the edge into the first flowerbed.

"Watch out, Sasuke," Sakura informed him, just after he lost his balance, walking up to the ledge, "the path splits in two."

She watched him tumble through the air—the fall wasn't that high, only a meter—and when Sasuke's hands touched the earth, he turned his fall into a roll in order to protect himself. What he had not taken into account was the fact that there was another flowerbed a meter below him—he quickly realized the fact as he rolled over the edge and landed on a rosebay bush below.

Sakura who had had her arms crossed stubbornly, uncrossed them and leapt nimbly down to his side; this was getting to be too much—and apparently Sasuke thought so as well.

"Damn it, Sakura!" he cursed at her as she helped him get detangled from the bush, where he dropped to the ground, "Why the hell are you doing this to me? The only time I've seen you do something like this...was when you're dealing with Naruto!"

Sakura glowered down at him, hoping that some way or another she was transmitting waves of her displeasure towards him, "Maybe it's

because you're acting so childish!"

He was sitting on the ground, a foul expression showing that he was brooding. He said nothing to her response, but clenched his fists. Sakura carefully stepped up to him, to avoid squashing a patch of canary grass.

"Sasuke, I know you're used to being independent—I know you like doing things on your own," she spoke angrily at him, her hands on her hips, "I know you avoid physical contact like everyone has the plague or something, but you know what? You can't live that way anymore! You are blind, Sasuke, as much I didn't want to say it to you, I'm finding I have to point out the obvious. You have lost your vision, something that gives your brain eighty percent of the information you receive—maybe even eighty-five to ninety percent for an Uchiha. Now you are relying one hundred percent on senses that only told you, at most, twenty percent of the things around you. There is no way that you will get by on your own now, you will always need some sort of assistance from time to time. This rehab is to get you accustomed to managing on your own, but that doesn't mean that you can completely rely on your other senses. I am trying to help you with that, doing my best to get you back to living a normal lifestyle, but you refuse to let me get near you. You are being help-resistant. If you still can't grow up and allow yourself to get help from other people once in a while, then you might as well forget about your revenge and let your brother live, because there will be absolutely no way that you can do this on your own."

After her long lecture, Sakura was left breathless since she had put so much force into her reprimands as she shouted at him. Silently sitting on the ground, Sasuke hadn't even flinched at her words, but she knew that even though his expression was masking his emotions, she had hit something sensitive and now he was thinking about what she said. After a while, his fists relaxed and he beckoned her over.

"Help me up," he ordered quietly, facing away from her.

A relieved smirk spread over her lips as she realized he had finally given in. Sighing, she gripped his arm and helped pull him to his feet, and already he looked steadier with her holding on.

"Trust me, it's a lot less embarrassing to have someone assist you down a hallway than tripping over every set of stairs and person you meet," she told him quietly as he offered her his arm and linked it with hers.

"You could have stopped me from looking like an idiot," he muttered, his head not held as proudly as before, but was tilted in a humbled way.

"How else was I to get common sense into you?" she replied with a smirk, leading him carefully out of the flowerbed, to the path that had forked and was not on their right, "Careful, there's a hedge here."

He carefully stepped over it after she had done so, leaning against her arm for support, and Sakura approved of his bettered behavior, however his attire was a little worse for wear. The white hospital gown was covered in dirt and there were a couple twigs caught in Sasuke's hair. The bandage around his head was no better as it had mud smeared over it.

"Let's go back inside and get you cleaned up," she said, trying not to laugh at his state, "Perhaps the fresh air is a little too much for you."

Sasuke sat on the bed in his room, wondering how on earth he came to the position he was in right now. He was back in the room where he was staying, sitting in a cross-legged position, his left arm outstretched to Sakura who was sitting next him, wiping off the dirt with a wet washcloth. His chin was rested in his right hand and his elbow was leaning on his knee; his jaw was set in a stubborn manner, reluctantly putting up with the procedure.

Sakura had kindly gone and retrieved another one of those horrible hospital gowns for him to wear, and removed the bandage from his

head to prevent dirt from getting into the wound. Though he would never outwardly admit it, he wished he had listened to Sakura to begin with and just accepted her help instead of going through all the embarrassing ordeals she had put him through. It couldn't be helped though, what was done was done, and he knew that if he did not cooperate with Sakura, he was completely helpless. He hated the prospect, but looking back to when he made the choice of blinding himself or not, he had made the better choice. He was alive, and not Orochimaru's vessel—even if being in this state was troublesome, he did not regret his decision.

"Alright, done," came Sakura's cheerfully, getting up, "Right arm next."

He moved his head to rest in the palm of his left hand as he extended his right arm over to her, where she began to wipe it gently with the washcloth. He sighed slightly, grateful that there was nobody in the room to witness what was going on; he felt embarrassed by his helplessness. He was actually a little angry about what had happened too—he had looked like a fool in front of all those people at the hospital, tripping over things that Sakura could have warned him about—completely missing that she had been trying to help him to begin with before they had even left the room. He clenched his jaw tightly and scowled; what fools the Uchihas must appear to be now.

"Turn your head towards me, Sasuke," Sakura ordered and he reluctantly complied.

The washcloth came to his face as Sakura gently removed anything smeared on. He couldn't understand her—she said she wanted to help him, yet she let him disgrace himself, and seemed to have found it amusing too. He suddenly winced as the washcloth came dangerously close to his eyes.

"Be careful!" he exclaimed irritably, flinching backwards away from her, trying to protect his sensitive eyes.

"I'm sorry, Sasuke, but I'm going to have to get close; we can't risk infection," she replied apologetically.

He grunted and allowed the washcloth to come in contact with his face again, bracing against the pain when she got a little too close to the sore area. After a few more minutes she took the cloth away and stood again. Her footsteps receded as he heard her rinse the washcloth out in the sink of the bathroom that was located somewhere at the other end of his room.

He turned away from her when she came back, he was still mad about how she had treated him. A sigh came from behind him and then he felt her pulling twigs and leaves from his hair. His foul mood darkened.

"I wish you would stop sulking, Sasuke," Sakura said from behind him, "It's very childish."

He felt her hands come away from him, followed by the sound of a few steps, then the rustle of a garbage bag as the leaves and twigs were dropped inside. A cupboard was opened somewhere and there was rummaging for a few seconds before it was closed again. Behind him, he could sense Sakura approaching once more, and then after a moment, a gauze bandage was rested against his eyes, being wound about his head. He waited patiently until Sakura tied the bandage before lying down on his bed and curling up into a ball.

"Why did you let me make a fool out of myself, Sakura?" he demanded, facing away from her, "I thought you wanted to help me."

"I tried to, but you wouldn't let me," she said in an exasperated tone, and he felt the corner of the mattress by his feet sink as she sat down, "You insisted that you 'could manage fine on your own'."

He curled up slightly tighter, feeling angry. "Perhaps I am too used to being independent," he hated saying it out loud, feeling vulnerable because she knew him that well.

"Well, I can't imagine that this is easy," Sakura murmured sympathetically, "I mean, after all, it must be terrible to be blinded. But there was nothing you could do, right? So it's not your fault you're in this state."

At that moment, Sasuke remembered every single reason why he had never liked Sakura. Her ironic, yet true, words awakened something within him; she couldn't understand him—she knew nothing about what he had been through. She had tried to associate with him even though she could never even begin to relate to him. It had always been that way, her clinging to him, agreeing with him, sympathizing with him, even if she knew nothing about the situation. She really did to meddle too much—of all the people in the hospital, why did it have to be her who had to help him? Why couldn't it be anybody but her? Why did it have to be Sakura? Why *Sakura* ?

A burning sensation erupted on his neck where the curse mark was; he could feel his anger awakening that power that Orochimaru had cursed him with. The twisting pain worming its way around his emotions, drawing motivation from them and then suddenly breaking free of his mood, running rampant and out of his control.

Anger suddenly disappeared as apprehension seeped in. His eyes widened despite him not being able to see, and he began feeling the marks starting to spread from the symbol on his neck. Frantically he tried to control it, force it to recede, but he was still weak and he was losing. It was spreading quicker than normal—he had noticed that it had been acting up strangely of late, but only when he activated it. Why was it activating without his consent? Panic started to grip him, which caused him to worry even more—he never panicked.

He slapped his hand onto the mark in desperation, though he knew that it would not be able to stem the power that had burst loose.

"Sakura!" he heard himself shout her name frantically, though he did not know what she could do for him. He only knew that if he didn't get the mark under control soon, he could end up killing her against

his will. Who knew what the village would do to him then—forget the deal, he would be most likely executed. Unacceptable.

The weight on the end of his bed disappeared quickly as Sakura ran over to his side, pulling his shoulder towards her, forcing him onto his back, "Sasuke! No, don't use that mark! Sasuke, stop it!"

"I can't!" he grunted out, as something feral seemed to emerge within the depths of his unconscious. His fingers began to twitch with sudden urges to hurt something, to destroy, while his conscious mind was doing everything in its power to resist.

There was a pause behind him as he continued to writhe in agony, and he wondered dimly what Sakura was doing. She pulled him up into a sitting position and he felt her bend down to his head. He could barely keep the curse's desire to reach about and strangle her under control—she should leave, she could end up getting killed. His grasp was slipping...why was she still here!?

"Gomen."

A sudden force hit the back of his neck sharply. Despite the seriousness of the situation, he smirked slightly in realization at the irony as he began to lose consciousness—this had been the same way he had knocked her out when he left three years ago. Blackness then took him as he finally passed out.

"He WHAT?!" Tsunade exclaimed slamming her hands down the desk as she faced Shizune who had just brought her news from the hospital.

"He activated the curse mark somehow," Shizune replied nervously at the Hokage's angry mood, "Sakura managed to knock him out, but the marks are still pulsing on his skin. She says that they feel warm to the touch."

Tsunade clenched her fists tightly before murmuring to herself, "I should have nipped this in the bud years ago when I brought him out of his coma."

"Tsunade-sama?" Shizune asked timidly, not sure what the Hokage would do.

"Shizune!" she exclaimed sharply and the young woman jumped to attention, "Gather the top elite medical ninja who specialize in curse binding and get them to meet me at the hospital. Now go, quickly!"

"Hai, Tsunade-sama!" the assistant exclaimed before dashing out of the room.

Tsunade didn't waste another moment as she leapt over her desk and ran out of the room, down the flight of stairs and towards the hospital. People hastily jumped out of the sprinting Hokage's way as she made her way down the street in a hurry. She just barely missed running over some visitors who were leaving the hospital as she burst through the front door. She didn't bother with the elevator but ran up the stairs, taking them two at a time, people jumping out of her way as she dashed down the hallways. She skidded to a stop in front of room two hundred and twenty one, and flung the door open.

Sakura was sitting on the edge of Sasuke's bed, holding his hand in hers, looking extremely pale and nervous. The curse mark was spread over half of Sasuke's body, having not quite extended to the other side; he was unconscious still, but the curse was causing him to shiver in a feverish way. Sakura looked up at Tsunade in a relieved manner as she approached the side of the bed, tears forming in her apprentice's eyes.

"Alright—come with me, Sakura," Tsunade ordered, not asking any questions or allowing Sakura to ask her any.

Tsunade picked up the unconscious boy and slung him over her shoulder like he was a sack of potatoes, ignoring Sakura's look of

shock and merely motioned for her to follow. Leaving at a brisk pace, Sakura matched it, wringing her hands as she walked.

"Tsunade-sama—?" Sakura began but Tsunade cut her off.

"What happened, Sakura?" she asked as they stepped into the elevator, the doors closing behind them.

"Oh, Tsunade-sama," Sakura wailed, covering her face with her hands, "I think it might have been my fault!"

"How so?"

"Sasuke wasn't being very cooperative, insisting that he could manage on his own...so I let him have his way, and—" Sakura took a shuddering breath, "—well, it wasn't very flattering for him. He fell and crashed into things a lot before he finally accepted my help. Do you think that perhaps because I put him under that strain, that the curse would...?"

"No," Tsunade replied firmly, a smile coming to her lips regardless of the situation, "Damaging someone's dignity never harmed anyone, and it certainly does not activate curse marks. An interesting method Sakura—somewhat amusing."

"Then what...?" Sakura asked, taking some deep breaths to calm herself.

Tsunade closed her eyes and pondered it for a moment, "I can't imagine he was in a good mood after being publicly embarrassed like that. Curse marks get sensitive over time, and I wouldn't be surprised if the anger caused it to activate."

Tsunade stepped off the elevator as soon as the door opened, striding down the hallway to a room that was dedicated to binding curses and other jutsu-inflicted damage.

"Then it was my—" Sakura began despairingly, but again she was cut off.

"How did he react to the curse flaring up?" Tsunade asked shortly, kicking open the door to the room and was disgusted to see that Shizune was late in bringing the ninja.

"He seemed...worried—no, more like terrified," Sakura pondered, clutching the handkerchief that Shizune had given her, knuckles white.

"Exactly," Tsunade replied, setting down Sasuke in the middle of the empty room, "He was not expecting it to react, and was desperately trying to control it. You did the right thing in knocking him out—who knows what might have happened if you hadn't done so."

"What are you going to do?" Sakura asked, seeming to have noticed the room for the first time.

Biting her thumb, Tsunade drew blood from the broken veins, and began to write the words of sealing that would form a pentacle.

"Some medic ninja and I are going to put a complex binding jutsu on that mark—one that will be a permanent binding," Tsunade replied, writing furiously, her movements sure as she smeared her thumb against the cold floor, "This is the last time that Sasuke will ever be connected to Orochimaru—he will never be able to use the power of that curse mark again."

A/N: Whee! I *am* evil...taking away his Sharingan and the curse mark? (cackles) Which is ironic, seeing as I'm the person who lost sleep because I think that he's going to die. (departs to sit in her emo corner)

Drieldwin

Chapter 6

A/N: Whee! Thanks so much for all the reviews everyone! This is by far my most popular story, and I cannot tell you how much I love having my story loved so much. Thank you everyone for your undying support!

This sounds random, but I don't like school. I think that it's boring, stressful and above all, lousy. I do not like going, and I sometimes I don't pay attention in my classes. But you know what I find helps me enjoy it? Take my Bio class for instance...normally semi-interesting, and dissections are gross. That was until we started learning about the human eye. That's how I make school interesting for me, to see how I can apply the knowledge to my fanfics. So, I too have refined my knowledge on the human eye, just like Sakura :D English has helped me predict some things about the series...which I really wish I hadn't found out...but at least you know I'm learning stuff. x.x

On another note, some people I know are all for ShikamaruIno, and others are for ShikamaruTemari. I'm still not sure where I'm going to go with Shikamaru's relationship, if anywhere. So right now any implied ShikaIno is kinda one-sided. Just thought I'd give you the heads up.

Chapter Six: Mismatched Pieces of a Puzzle

It was not Sasuke's internal clock that told him to wake up from the long slumber that he had fallen into, but rather the loud and obnoxious outburst that had erupted somewhere outside his room that disturbed his enjoyed sleep. He groaned slightly and rested his arm across his forehead, dimly wondering what was going on. Again he found himself wondering what had happened to him—a feeling he had come to find very annoying.

"WHERE IS HE?" came the obnoxious sounding voice—one that had changed with time but was still very recognizable, "I'M GOING TO KILL HIM!"

Sasuke groaned and rolled over onto his side, facing away from the door. He knew that word would get out that he had returned to the village, and he knew that eventually the person who was making a ruckus outside the door was going to come and confront him.

"Naruto!" Sasuke heard Sakura exclaim from outside the door, "Sasuke is *resting* right now—along with a number of other patients. This is a *hospital* and I would appreciate it if you kept your voice down."

"After everything he's done to his friends and to the village?! I'm going to beat some sense into him if it's the last thing I do!" Naruto's reply came and there were some grunts like he was trying to make it past Sakura in the hallway but she was preventing passage.

"Sasuke is in no condition to be seen right now! He's asleep and if you continue to be noisy, you may wake him!" Sakura retorted, sounding like she had landed a punch on Naruto somewhere.

Sasuke's lip twitched in amusement.

"You shouldn't come so early in the morning either, Naruto!" Sakura exclaimed, "More people are asleep at this time!"

A frown creased Sasuke's face, the last thing he remembered was that it was the afternoon and the curse mark had started to spread. What had happened since then?

"It doesn't matter if Sasuke's injured or not, he can take it! I owe him a good beating for what he did to you!" Naruto growled from the hallway.

What he had done to Sakura? A small frown descended on to his face. What *had* he done to Sakura?

"That. Is. Enough!" Sakura lashed out angrily on the other side of Sasuke's room door, "I will not have you going in there! You don't know what has happened to Sasuke—I can tell you right now that he is not in any condition to see anyone! Now please leave, Naruto, before I call hospital security and have you thrown out."

There was silence in the hall for a moment, "Sa-Sakura-chan..."

"Please, Naruto," Sasuke heard Sakura said in a weary tone.

There was another pause and then Naruto spoke again, "What happened to Sasuke?"

"That's confidential, Naruto," Sakura said curtly, "As Sasuke's healer, I am not at liberty to tell you. Only Sasuke can tell you if he wants—but you're going to have to wait until he's better before I'll let you see him."

There was a sigh, and Sasuke almost didn't catch it because of the walls and closed door, "I'll come back some other time then..."

There was the sound of receding footsteps that sounded partially dragged, and it was not until that they had completely faded from his hearing that Sakura opened the door to his room tentatively.

"Sasuke?" she whispered quietly, "Are you still asleep?"

He rolled back onto his back, a grim smile on his lips, "I was...until Naruto decided to pay a visit."

Sakura's footsteps drew near to him and the side of his bed sank a little as she sat down on its edge.

"I'm sorry I let him wake you," she said softly, "I shouldn't have let him make it this far."

"Still as hard-headed as ever," Sasuke commented.

"Some things never change," he heard her say in a poignant tone and he knew that she was smiling, "And Naruto is one of those things."

"Hn."

"Just so you know, now that Naruto knows that you've returned, it's going to spread like wildfire throughout our old schoolmates. You'll probably be getting many more people who want to visit you," Sakura said after a pause, "It's out of our hands now."

"How did Naruto find out?" Sasuke asked in irritation.

"He has this habit of listening in on Tsunade-sama at work, trying to get on all the missions that would have helped in returning you to the village. He promised to bring you back, and he had never forgotten that promise," Sakura replied, and to Sasuke, she sounded slightly emotional, "Apparently what he heard this morning was enough for him to figure out that you were back here in Konoha."

"I see..." Sasuke growled mentally; he did not want visitors. He preferred it if he didn't have anything to do with people at all, "Sakura... Thank you."

"For what?" her tone was confused.

"For not telling Naruto what happened," was his response.

"They're going to find out anyways, but I wanted you to be the one who decides when they get to learn about it," Sakura told him, sounding sympathetic.

"Hn."

"Anyways, how are you feeling today?" she asked him as she stood again and put something on the nightstand beside him. There was a rummaging and then the sound of papers being attached to a clipboard.

"Tired," he responded.

She sat down on the edge of his bed again, and he could feel her gaze on him, "No aching or burning sensations? Nothing?"

"No..." Sasuke replied. He paused for a moment and then looked away from her, "What happened, Sakura?"

He heard her lay the clipboard on her lap and sigh faintly, "Yesterday your curse mark went out of control. Tsunade-sama said that curses become sensitive over time, and they react to the smallest jump in emotion. Understandably, you were probably a little more than irritated with me for what I put you through, and that triggered the mark."

Sasuke clenched his fist slightly—he shouldn't have let that happen. After being abandoned by Orochimaru, using the curse would only cause him to become more reliant on that power given to him, and thus binding him to his old sensei. A bond would cause him to again be drawn to the sannin...and because of his condition he was nothing but an annoyance. He would most likely be killed. That was why he had promised himself, as he was tortured by Kabuto and other Sound ninja, to never to use it again, save for one task, and that task only—to kill his brother.

"What happened after that?" he asked, not liking the feeling of having to be dependant on Sakura for anything—information included.

"I knocked you out, and you were taken to a room on the fourth floor which is specifically used for binding jutsu-caused side-effects and curses. There the Hokage and four other medical ninja spent the rest of the day binding that mark on your neck," Sakura replied, "permanently."

"Sakura?"

"Yes, Sasuke?"

"Please leave," he stated, his fist clenching and unclenching under the sheets, "I'm still tired."

Sakura stood up from his bed, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have kept you awake. Just ask the nurse for me when you are rested."

There was rustling as Sakura put away the objects she had been holding, before there were the footsteps of her walking across the room, opening the door and shutting it quietly behind her. It was after her footsteps were completely gone from earshot that his hand lashed out and grabbed the aluminum frame of the bed, crushing the bar tightly in his hand. Fury seethed in his mind as he continued to apply pressure to the bar; the curse mark had been sealed permanently, and the power was gone—along with any chance that he had in defeating Itachi.

Sakura knew that even though Sasuke said he wanted to rest, she knew he just wanted to be alone for a while. Losing the curse mark must have been a blow because she knew it probably had been a reliable source of power for him, and no longer having that power was almost as bad as losing the Sharingan.

Sakura pushed the down button on the elevator and waited patiently, casting a glance in the direction of Sasuke's room. She figured it would be a while before he was cooled down again, so she might as well run some errands while she waited. She entered the open elevator door after casting a last look at Sasuke's room; he'd get over it.

She stepped off on the main floor and walked over to the reception desk, adjusting the bag that was slung over her shoulder.

"Sakura," the receptionist, Maeko, smiled, "What can I do for you?"

"I'm going out for a bit while my patient is resting, I need a phone just in case he wakes and needs me while I'm gone," Sakura explained

opening her bag, pulling out the notes she took earlier, "Give these to Tsunade-sama when she arrives today, will you?"

"Certainly," the receptionist smiled, exchanging an on-call cell phone for the papers, "Have a good time, Sakura."

Ino stood outside the flower shop, setting up the exterior display of flowers, arranging them neatly into place. It was still early in the day but she had been late in setting out the flowers—her mother would not be pleased. Ino hurried back indoors and grabbed another bouquet of flowers from a tub of water where they were kept, trying to keep the water from dripping on her. She carefully carried them outside, being cautious with the delicate petals, not wanting to squash them. Gently she set them in the stand outside, making sure the colours complemented the ones of the flowers around them. She stepped back and admired her work—one of the best arrangements yet.

It was then that out of the corner of her eye that Ino saw Sakura walking down the road, carrying a shoulder bag that seemed to be weighed heavily down. What was Sakura up to? She hadn't seen her in days—she had been up at the hospital, so busy lately that Ino hadn't seen her walk home everyday like she used to. The heavy shoulder bag was suspicious too...normally it didn't weigh down so much on Sakura's shoulder; it was like she was carrying bricks or something in there. Dashing quickly into the shop so that Sakura didn't notice her presence, Ino watched Sakura from the shop window with curiosity, hiding low amongst the flowers. Sakura passed the shop without casting a glance over and continued up the street, seeming preoccupied.

"Mom! I'm going out for a bit! I'll be back later!" Ino shouted into the back of the store after she had watched Sakura disappear around the corner of the block.

Rushing outside, she headed ran up the street to where she had seen Sakura go around the corner. Placing her hand on the side of

the building, Ino peered around the corner and spotted Sakura's bright petal-pink hair among the crowds. She was no longer wearing black, she noted with interest, but wearing her regular red dress and green shorts. A frown marred Ino's face, and she narrowed her blue eyes—surely she was not finished mourning Sasuke so soon.

"Oi, Ino!"

Ino looked over her shoulder and saw Shikamaru standing on the sidewalk, his lazy and annoyed expression on his face.

"Have you seen Chouji?" he called over to her, his hands lazily in his pockets.

She put a finger to her lips and made a shushing sound, "There's no time for that, come here!"

He raised an inquisitive eyebrow and lazily wandered across the street, "What is it?"

She pointed around the corner to where Sakura was still walking, "See that?"

"What—Sakura?" he asked, his expression unchanging, "What about her?"

"She's been acting very suspiciously lately," Ino replied crossing her arms, "We're going to follow her and find out what she's up to."

"Why should I come along? I don't care about Sakura's doings—I'd much rather go watch the clouds with Chouji," he replied shrugging his shoulders.

A vein appeared on Ino's forehead and she clenched her fist, waving it at him, "That's a lame use of an afternoon!"

He glanced at her impassively, not seeming disturbed by her demonic appearance. "I've got better things to do, Ino."

"Oh no you don't!" she grabbed the back of his shirt as he turned walk away, yanking him back towards her, "You're coming with me!"

She dashed around the corner after Sakura as she disappeared further down the road, a reluctant Shikamaru following after her. Sakura was far enough away that the crowds between them would hide her and Shikamaru easily, and they would not be spotted unless Sakura was expecting someone to be following her. Ino smirked deviously to herself—billboard brow was up to something, and she was going to find out what.

"How troublesome," Shikamaru muttered behind her, clearly not enjoying himself.

They followed Sakura down the street as she continued to walk, they themselves trying not to look suspicious within the crowd yet trying to hide from sight. There were many stores that lined the road, yet Sakura didn't stop at any of them, increasing Ino's suspicions.

"See! She's not shopping at any of the stores!" she hissed to Shikamaru, "She's obviously up to something."

"Maybe she's just out for a walk," he replied grumpily.

"With that bag?" Ino asked incredulously, "There's no way she would take something that heavy for a walk! See how it's digging into her shoulder like that? I wonder what's in it..."

"Probably some books," Shikamaru replied disinterestedly, "Is this really necessary, Ino? Don't you have some work at the pharmacy or flower shop to deal with?"

She scowled at him ignoring his last question, "I'm not letting you go until we get to the bottom of this!"

"Troublesome..."

"Oh! Come on!" Ino retorted, grabbing his arm and hauling him onwards once again, keeping her eyes continually on the back of Sakura's pink head.

Sakura continued to walk along the way, still not having noticed the chuunin and jounin ninja who were following her. Ino smirked again, wondering how on earth Sakura had passed the last chuunin exam that she had taken; it was a wonder within itself that she hadn't even felt their presence yet.

Shikamaru was grumbling again from behind and Ino was about to take a swing at his head when Sakura suddenly turned into the neighborhood that had once been where the Uchiha clan had taken up residence. This was interesting...mourning Sasuke and wearing black, and the day that she stopped wearing black she decided to pay a visit to the old Uchiha neighborhood.

"Did you see that?" Ino squealed quietly to Shikamaru, "Did you see where she just went?"

"Yeah," he replied, not caring much, "What of it?"

"Two days ago I ran into Sakura while she was coming home from the hospital. She was garbed in all black and after a little prying she told me that she was mourning Sasuke," Ino explained hastily as she dragged Shikamaru to the corner of the block, "But suddenly today she's wearing her regular clothing again...and then she pays a visit to *this* neighborhood. Don't you find that a little suspicious?"

Shikamaru raised his head upwards to the sky thoughtfully, and after a moment he shrugged, "That's a bit strange."

"Exactly!" Ino replied, making a fist and pounding it into her other hand, "So, what could our little Sakura be up to?"

"It's none of my business," Shikamaru replied, attempting to leave again, but Ino pulled him back.

"I said before, I'm not letting you go until we get to the bottom of this!" Ino snapped as she hauled him down the street, her gaze fixed on Sakura.

Again, Shikamaru uttered a 'troublesome', but Ino ignored him. Sakura had just disappeared around another corner. Following quietly behind, Ino came up to the edge of the building and looked around carefully. Sakura had stopped, and was now standing in front of an old traditional building that looked like it needed some repairs—clearly it was uninhabited. Ino's interest piqued as Sakura walked up to the old gate that was in front of her, looked around, and then sailed over the side when she thought nobody was looking.

"Isn't that Sasuke's house?" she asked Shikamaru uncertainly, turning to face him.

A trivial frown was on the lazy ninja's brow as he looked at the gate of the Uchiha estate, seeming finally interested in what Sakura was up to, "Yeah."

"Now what could Sakura be looking for in the Uchiha house?" she asked Shikamaru, a twisted smile on her lips, "Let's go find out, shall we?"

She leapt upwards onto the roof of the building they were standing at the corner of, and Shikamaru followed her without complaint, seeming to forget that he wanted to be elsewhere. Jumping from roof to roof, they paused at the last building and peered down into the front garden of the Uchiha Manor over the peak of the shingles. Sakura was walking around to the back of the house, carefully pushing aside some overgrown bushes and walking through in a way that she would come around back unscathed.

Leaping down into the garden and alighting on the branch of a sturdy tree, Ino beckoned Shikamaru to follow. He landed quietly beside her and peered intently at the side of the house.

"If we're going to follow, we had better be quick and as quiet as possible," he told her softly, "We don't know when she'll be back."

Ino nodded and dropped down to the ground running quickly across the untidy lawn and around the side of the house where Sakura had traveled. She pushed aside the branches and stepped over the leaves as silently and hurriedly as she could, Shikamaru not far behind. Emerging on the other side, Ino glanced about the area nervously. There was no doubt that Sasuke's house had been empty and unkempt for a long time, as the garden she saw was almost a jungle with weeds.

"Oi, Ino," Shikamaru muttered grouchyly from behind, "There's Sakura's bag."

Following his gaze, Ino saw Sakura's bag lying on the porch in front of the back entryway. Listening carefully, Ino made sure that Sakura wasn't nearby before quickly sneaking up to the bag and opening the flap.

"What are you doing, Ino?" Shikamaru hissed from behind her, running up as well, "This is risky; she could find us at any moment."

"Be quiet for a minute, will you?" she hissed as she peered at the contents of the bag.

A cell phone, a first aid kit, an ophthalmoscope, bandages, a wallet, and two large medical textbooks were inside. Reading the titles on the spines, Ino observed that they were about the human eye. This was getting stranger by the second... The contents of the bag didn't take up much of its total capacity and quite a lot of space was left over.

"Ino," Shikamaru whispered to her, "Footsteps."

Quickly Ino shut the bag and both leapt back away from it, taking up a hiding spot within some bushes. Peering out carefully through the leaves, both of them saw Sakura exit the house with a number of

items held in her arms. Kneeling down on the veranda, Sakura laid the items gently on the ground and opened up her bag.

At that moment, the cell phone within Sakura's bag began to ring, and she pulled it out quickly and answered it.

"Moshi moshi," she said cheerfully, then nodded, "Mmhmm... Alright, let him know that I'll be there soon... No, I'm not too far, just picking up a few things and I'm just packing up. In the meantime, can you see to it that he is showered off and fed? I don't think he's had anything to eat since lunchtime yesterday. He was unconscious after Tsunade-sama dealt with the problem that came up... Thank you, Maeko. I'll see you in a bit... Okay, goodbye."

Noticing nothing out of the ordinary, Sakura placed the cell phone back into her bag and began to put the items she had collected from Sasuke's house into it as well. She put them inside with a delicate touch, like she did not want to damage anything. From the distance that she and Shikamaru were at, Ino found that she couldn't tell what most of the items were, but clearly recognized two folded sets of clothing, the emblem of the Uchiha on the back of one of the garments.

Sakura finished packing up the bag, and after closing it, slung it onto her shoulder. She closed the door to the house and locked it carefully before heading back to the side of the house, carefully making her way back through the underbrush with ease. Ino and Shikamaru waited until she was completely gone before straightening up.

"Well, that was strange," Shikamaru commented, rubbing his chin thoughtfully, "You were right, she has been acting oddly."

"I told you!" Ino replied in a feisty manner, "She was mourning Sasuke for the past couple of days, then she disappears to the hospital for a while and is suddenly back into her regular attire. Then she comes here carrying a couple of books on the human eye of all things, takes a bunch of Sasuke's things and receives a phone call

from the hospital talking about someone who hasn't eaten since yesterday! It doesn't add up!"

Shikamaru closed his eyes, "The books on the eye could be related to the phone call, but neither of them seem related to her change in mood over Sasuke. This is certainly troublesome."

"What do you make of it?" Ino asked, putting her hands on her hips, a confused expression on her face.

"I have a theory..." he pondered quietly to himself, "But even to me it doesn't entirely fit. We're missing too much information. Shouldn't you know what she's talking about over the phone? I thought you were a medical ninja too."

"I am, but I work at the pharmacy! I don't know much about what happens in the hospital, I just make the medicines. Anyways, are we going to follow her some more?" Ino asked stepping out from behind the bush and into the yard, "We'd better hurry if we don't want to lose her."

"No, she'll be going back to the hospital and we'll have a harder time following her," he replied boredly, "I'm going back."

"Don't leave me behind!" Ino exclaimed, rushing after him, pushing the brambles aside.

Shikamaru shrugged as the both emerged on the other side. Ino sighed at his laid-back attitude, wondering how on earth he managed to stay so calm and carefree all the time. She was just eating herself wondering what Sakura was doing with Sasuke's things, and Shikamaru didn't seem remotely interested.

"We should ask around, shouldn't we?" Ino asked, coming up beside him, "Maybe other people have noticed Sakura acting strangely."

"I don't really care," Shikamaru replied, now that the interesting part was over. He looked up at the sky, "And now all the clouds have

cleared away. This is so troublesome... I'm going to go find Naruto and Chouji."

"Naruto!" Ino exclaimed happily, grabbing his arm and dragging him towards the main gate, "That's a good idea, Shikamaru! We'll go ask Naruto about Sakura!"

"Eh—nani?!" Shikamaru grunted in confusion, "Why do you think he would know anything?"

"He's Sakura's teammate! He should notice if she's been acting strangely," she replied with certainty.

"Team Seven has been split up for years now, Ino. Naruto and Sakura haven't been on a mission together in ages," he told her irritably, "Not to mention it's Naruto—he would be the last person to notice anything strange."

"Oh, it can't hurt to try!" and with that last statement, Ino dragged Shikamaru over the fence with her, not allowing him another moment to argue.

A/N: Yay: Chapter six! Ino's getting suspicious of Sakura, Shikamaru doesn't care, Sasuke's lost the curse mark—which is a good thing, but he's not too happy anyways, and Naruto is being his exuberant self! The suspense:O lol, sorta. But you have to admit—things are getting more complex.

Either ffnet is acting screwy or my email decided to hate me, because I am no longer getting my reviews sent to my inbox. Is anyone else having this problem? x.x

Please review!

Drieldwin

Chapter 7

A/N: Alrighty then! I got a couple of very good questions from icygirl2 and I thought that everyone deserved to know the answers to them.

Q: How will Sasuke kill Itachi if he's blind? Is he going to be stronger and learn another source of power by developing other senses? Will there be a battle between Itachi and Sasuke?

A: Well, as much as I'd like to answer all of the questions, I can't without giving away too much of the story—I have it all planned out. What I will tell you is that yes Sasuke does manage to...grow accustomed...to his blindness, but I won't tell you how. Also, there will be a battle between Sasuke and Itachi, with a unique outcome.

I hope that's got you excited for what's in store. On with the story!

Chapter Seven: Of Trust, Spilled Secrets, and Other Things

Sakura opened the door to Sasuke's room and greeted him with a smile that he couldn't see. He had been showered and cleaned, a fresh hospital gown and his damp hair told her as much; and a tray that had the remnants of a meal scattered on it, lay on his lap. Sasuke himself was holding a bowl, prodding the inside with his chopsticks in an investigative manner, shoving aside food he didn't like, and probing around for anything good that was left over. Sakura watched his behavior with interest—so he was already using techniques like those to help him discern his surroundings; rehab shouldn't be too difficult if he was already picking up on it by himself.

"Sorry I kept you waiting," she said cheerfully, going over to him and resting her book bag on the nightstand, "I see that they got you some food—that's good. Did you sleep at all while I was gone?"

"A little," he replied absently, setting down the bowl and chopsticks, "Where were you?"

"Just wanted to grab a few things, that's all," Sakura replied happily, not wanting to state that she had been going through things at his house, "I brought something for you too. –Are you done eating?"

"Aa."

Sakura took the tray from his lap and carried it over to the door, setting it outside and off to the right—a nurse would come and pick it up later. Turning around, she closed the door behind her and walked up to Sasuke once more. She opened her bag up and withdrew the set of clothing that she had taken from his house.

"I know those hospital gowns feel terrible and itch something dreadful, so I brought you some clothes—thought they would be more comfortable," she told him, laying them on his lap, "I don't know whose they are, because your stuff is still the same size as when you left. It might be your father's—anyways, it's a similar style, and I got you black, since that seems to be your preference."

Sasuke said nothing as he placed his hands on the folded garments, feeling the fabric in his hands, an unreadable expression on his face. He traced the emblem of the Uchiha clan, running his fingertip along the seam in a thoughtful and memory-invoking manner. Sakura wondered what he was thinking of at that moment, his bandaged eyes preventing her from reading any emotion behind them.

"I'll step out of the room so you can change," she said pleasantly, walking over to the other side of his bed and drawing the curtains shut, "Just give me a shout when you're ready."

Sakura closed the door behind her after she had exited the room, and waited patiently. The halls were rather quiet that day—it was not nearly as busy as it had been a couple years back. Konoha was completely recovered since Orochimaru's attack and no longer were the ninja teams being constantly sent out on dangerous missions.

There was the occasional one that took a turn for the worse, but there were hardly any serious cases, and so far this year, only one ninja had died on a mission. The chaos had diminished as things settled out and the hospital was peaceful as it should be—also a lack of Naruto tended to help matters.

"Sakura," Sasuke's voice came from the inside of the room.

Smiling, she went back inside, once again closing the door behind her. She looked over at Sasuke, who seemed to have had no trouble changing clothes, however—Sakura laid a hand over her smiling lips so that she wouldn't be tempted to giggle. Once the feeling had passed, she lowered her hand and cleared her throat slightly.

"Sasuke, your shirt is on backwards," she said as politely as she could, managing to keep the amused tone out of her voice.

The young Uchiha growled and retracted his arms inside his shirt. After a moment of struggling, he managed to get it rotated around his neck so that he could slide his arms out through the sleeves once more. He sat rigidly, trying to act as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened; Sakura mused at his prideful behavior.

Walking over to the edge of the bed, Sakura picked up the discarded hospital gown, "Feel for the tags inside the neckline, it's easier to tell which is front and back that way."

A grunt was all the response that she got out of him and Sakura couldn't help but grin to herself. She knew that he was embarrassed—the redness on the back of his neck told her as much—so she decided not to say more on the matter, choosing not to prod at Sasuke's already bruised ego. After tossing the gown into a laundry hamper, she went and sat down on the edge of the bed, kicking off her shoes. Swinging her legs up over the side, she took a cross-legged sitting position opposite Sasuke.

"I'll start the process," she said about to reach out and removed the bandage, but Sasuke reached up quicker than her and grasped the

ties on the end of the knot.

He untied the bandage from behind his head and let it unwind fully before he gathered it up in his lap. He let it rest for a moment, feeling the gauze between his fingertips before offering it to her. Taking it gently, she folded it up tidily after his hands had returned to resting on his knees, where he sat silently as before. It was a psychological thing, she knew; he took off the bandage in order to give him a little sense of independence, and she was aware that he probably needed that reassurance.

"Alright then," she spoke happily, laying the bandage beside her, "Let's begin."

"...Wait."

Sakura paused, lowering her hands again for the second time; a vaguely worried expression came across her face, "What is it?"

For a moment Sasuke said nothing, but merely turned his head so that he was facing the floor. He licked his lips, and then inhaled a little, then let it out again. There was another short silence before he could say what he wanted to.

"I'm sorry," he muttered faintly.

Sakura blinked, so surprised that even Inner Sakura stopped to stare. Had she just heard correctly? Had Uchiha Sasuke just apologized? Her brows knitted together in worry; the Sasuke she had known had rarely apologized for anything, even if he knew he was wrong.

"Whatever for?" she asked quietly, knowing that she probably sounded confused.

"For what happened yesterday...with the curse mark... it shouldn't have happened," he replied, still not turning towards her.

This was a huge step for the prideful Uchiha, and Sakura could tell that he was having a hard time saying this to her. She felt compassion flood her when she looked at him, his head tilted away in a humble manner, his mouth set in a firm line.

"I couldn't control it," he stated gruffly, and after a moment's pause, "I'm sorry."

Sakura thought a moment about reaching out and grabbing his hand, but decided against it, knowing that that was probably going to far at this point. He still didn't entirely trust her, and she didn't want to destroy the fragile relationship they already had. She smiled sadly instead, and kept her hands in her lap.

"It's not your fault," she replied, shaking her head slightly from side to side, "It was partially my doing. I kinda provoked it into happening."

Sasuke continued to face the floor, and after another long silence he spoke again.

"I was never going to use it again," he told her, his voice quiet, yet firm and hesitant at the same time, "except once. I thought that I could use it to get around my blindness, and kill Itachi using it."

The expression on his face told her that he didn't want to talk much about it, but he was telling her anyways, despite not wanting to. Whether it was a return of the trust that she had shown him, or if he just felt the need to talk to somebody about the matter, Sakura didn't know. She glanced over to her left and noted that a bar on the bed frame had been conformed to the shape of, and crushed by, somebody's fist—Sakura knew very well whose fist it was.

"Sasuke, just because you're blind doesn't mean that you have to give up the life of a shinobi," she told him tenderly, "I may have been assigned to simply get you back on your feet so that you can live on your own, but ultimately it's you who decides when you want me to leave. If you want me to help you to rebuild your skills so that you can stay a shinobi, you just have to ask. And I know that there are

others who would be willing to help you learn skills that I can't teach you. Nobody resents you for leaving Konoha, Sasuke—you were greatly missed. And as far as Naruto and I are concerned, you are still a citizen of this village, and always will be."

She let the silence drag out for a little while so that he could chew on her words, letting him think it over a bit.

"I would like to start the therapeutic process—if that's alright with you," she said tentatively, "I've recovered quite a bit of chakra since yesterday, and I can go for longer if you wish."

"Hn," he responded, turning his head towards her, opening his eyes. She knew he was still thinking about what she had said, and she gently laid her fingers on the chakra points, not wanting to disrupt his thoughts.

"Just relax," she told him, as she began to collect her chakra, "You don't want a sore back again."

Closing her own eyes, she focused the chakra and sent it out through her fingers, picking up where she had left off the previous day, healing the damage slowly and with care.

Sakura's words had touched something within him, making him feel undeserving of her devotion and determination to help him. The reaction he had to losing the curse mark made him feel selfish and ungrateful as he reflected on it—though he knew that he would sooner die than ever admit it.

He set his jaw as he recalled something Kakashi had once said to him—that if he relied on the cure mark, it would prevent him from ever growing stronger; and he wondered to himself if it was already too late for him. He should have never allowed the curse mark to be awakened, he could have killed Sakura, and then who knew what would have happened after that. He should have on no account gotten angry with her...he was the one who had acted out of line.

The loss of the curse mark was entirely his fault, and he didn't blame Sakura at all for what happened—that was why he had asked her to leave the room for a while, he didn't want to take his anger out at her.

He thought of the deformed frame of the bed—that was what he had taken his anger out on. It was his own incompetence that had cost him the power he had been saving, and now it was gone. If he hadn't been so naïve about Orochimaru giving him power, or so childish in not acknowledging Naruto's improvements by striving to continue to believe he was better, he might have never ended up in the situation where he had to take his vision. He could have improved without Orochimaru—all he needed to do was ask for help.

He shouldn't have refused *her* help.

A memory came to mind as he recalled the first time Kakashi had taught them to focus chakra in order to climb trees without using their arms. Naruto had asked Sakura for help, hoping to get some tips on to how to do better. It wasn't until many bruises and painful landings later before he had grudgingly asked Naruto about what Sakura had told him, only to have Naruto grin wickedly and refuse to tell him anything for the longest time.

If you want me to help you to rebuild your skills so that you can stay a shinobi, you just have to ask.

He just had to ask. That was it—it was so simple, yet why was it so difficult? He should have asked Sakura for help back then, then he wouldn't have had to put up with Naruto's gloating and he most likely would have made it to the top quicker.

And even though he no longer had the curse mark or the Sharingan, he had to get strong again—he still had to avenge his clan. Even if it meant living in this state, he would do it.

... The most despicable way...

' I will defeat you, Itachi,' he thought fiercely to himself, his brows knitting, banishing Itachi's voice from his head, *'But I will do it my way.'*

"Is something wrong?" Sakura asked, and Sasuke realized that she must have seen the frown on his face.

"lie," he replied shortly. After a moment he added reluctantly, "I want you to help me to continue being a shinobi."

He could not see her smile, but he somehow knew that it was there.

"Okay," was her response, and he could hear a warmth in her voice that made him relax to some extent. Somewhere inside of him, he had been worried that she would have refused.

"Arigato," he murmured quietly, feeling unworthy of her help.

"Don't worry about it."

A silence fell between them after that, and Sasuke knew that it was probably to help her concentrate on the process. Her fingertips felt warm against his face as the chakra flowed from them, healing his eyes. The sensation was a strange one—as the injury mended, it felt like it tickled, but not to an intensity where he felt the need to rub his eyes to be rid of the reaction. It was a peculiarly enjoyable sensation and the flow of the chakra caused his mind to feel a little tranquil, a strange feeling of serenity pulling on the corner of his awareness, trying to get him to relax.

His suspicious nature and stiffness the previous day had fought off the effects of the chakra flow, but now it descended on him like a thick blanket, and he was no longer as alert as he had been. He felt the urge to rest his hands on top of Sakura's in order to keep them from leaving his face—to keep the feeling from going away. He couldn't remember the last time he felt as peaceful as he was feeling now.

It seemed too soon that Sakura lowered her hands away from his face, the warmth of her gentle chakra going with them. The ticklish sensation receded and the dull ache returned to his eyes, but not nearly as bad as it had been before. His attentiveness began to fade back, and he couldn't help but feeling bewildered as he reflected on what he had been thinking a few moments back. He shouldn't have let his mind loosen up like that.

"I've been at it for just over an hour," Sakura said quietly, not having moved at all from the end of the bed—had it really been an hour? It seemed only like minutes, "How do you feel?"

"Better," he replied closing his eyes.

"I think after a few more sessions, you'll be released from here," she told him kindly, but sounding slightly sleepy, "Tsunade-sama said that she would be sending someone to come talk to you about what you know about Orochimaru. They should be here in half an hour or so. You should try and get some sleep in before then.

He nodded mutely.

"After that's over, I'll come back and we'll take a walk around," she said shuffling over to the side of the bed. The weight disappeared as she stood, "and when we come back, I'll start something new with you."

He heard her pick up her belongings from the nightstand.

"Sakura?" he turned to face her and was a little startled as she brushed the bandage over his eyes, wrapping it around his head carefully.

"Yes, Sasuke?" she asked him gently, tying the cloth behind his head.

"...I trust you," he stated bluntly.

There was a pause and his hand was gently taken by hers. She ran her thumb over the back of his hand as she picked it up, brushing the knuckles, "I'm glad."

"Why did you just take my hand like that?" he asked, mystified by her actions, and slightly suspicious.

"It's part of what we'll be starting this afternoon," she replied simply, "Recognition by touch. It's also to let you know that I trust you too, Sasuke."

She released his hand and he rested it on his knee.

"You've been through a lot," she told him, sounding compassionate, "You need your rest."

"Aa."

Her footsteps patted quietly against the floor and the door creaked open.

"I'll see you this afternoon," she said brightly before she closed the door gently behind her.

"NANI?!" Naruto exclaimed pointing a finger unbelievably at Kakashi, "You *finally* get some time off from doing missions and you're telling me that you're TOO BUSY TO TRAIN ME?!"

"Now, now, Naruto," Kakashi said leisurely, walking down the road, his nose tucked in a familiar novel, "You're completely overreacting."

"Well, Ero-sennin is supposedly out making investigations about that Akatsuki group again, but it's not like there's any new information coming in. My bet is that he's probably flirting with all the local girls, 'researching' for the next edition of that series that you enjoy so much! But the point is that he's not around to train me!" Naruto

complained, kicking a pebble on the road, "Seems like a waste of time, what he's doing..."

"He's on important business, Naruto," Kakashi said absently.

"Well, that's why *you* have to train me, Kakashi-sensei!" Naruto exclaimed boisterously, "You're overdue for training me anyways. The first time we took the chuunin exam you went and trained Sasuke instead! It's my turn to be trained now. You should teach me that Chidori attack thing, you know?"

"The Hokage has assigned me to a really important assignment, Naruto," Kakashi replied lowering his book to look at his watch, "And I'm late as it is."

"An important assignment?" Naruto's eyes lit up and Kakashi turned his gaze to the heavens, realizing he said the wrong words to Naruto: 'important' and 'assignment', "So where's it at? I'll come help too! I can do it better than anyone else!"

"No, no, Naruto," Kakashi said nervously sweat-dropping, waving his hands in front of him to shoo his old pupil off, "I'm sure that the hospital would appreciate it more if I took on the mission on alone."

"NANI?!" Naruto exclaimed loudly at Kakashi, making his sensei appear small and inferior in comparison. "You're going to the *HOSPITAL* ? You're going to see Sasuke, aren't you?"

Kakashi paused for a moment to blink at the boy, wondering how on earth he knew about Sasuke. He decided not to dwell on the matter, and thought it better if he try to shake Naruto off.

There was a heavy and disapproving sigh from the fox-faced boy, "You know, sensei, you shouldn't play favorites so much."

"I'll train you later, Naruto," Kakashi promised lightly, before abruptly disappearing from the vicinity, making his way to the hospital hurriedly before Naruto could notice his disappearance.

After a few moments there was a loud outburst from the area he just left.

"GET BACK HERE, KAKASHI-SENSEI! I'M NOT DONE TALKING TO YOU! ...HEY!"

Kakashi grinned lazily under his mask—some things never change.

It was late in the morning and drawing closer towards the noon hour, the sun shining beautifully on at day like that one. Everyone was out and about enjoying themselves, taking advantage of the good weather—but Shikamaru was *not* enjoying himself. He was looking around town for Chouji and Naruto, and so far hadn't had any luck in locating them—while that in itself was troublesome, there was also an annoying blonde who was still following him, doing a better job than his own shadow.

He had ignored her mostly as he visited all the usual restaurants where Chouji complemented the food, and other favourite hangouts, but no such luck yet; every place had been devoid of the two boys. There was only one place left to try, and if they weren't there, Shikamaru had no idea where on earth to look. Rolling his eyes heavenwards to the sadly cloudless sky, he prayed that Naruto would be at the last place he was looking, just so he could get rid of Ino.

After continuing on down the path for a while, ignoring Ino's continuous stream of gossip, a sigh of relief escaped him as he recognized the back of Naruot's orange tracksuit sitting on a stool at his favourite ramen joint—Ichiraku's. He also saw Chouji's form in there as well, though it was a little difficult to see him from all the dirty dishes stacked around him. But it was no mistaking; he had found them both, and what luck, at the same place too. The day seemed a little better already.

"There's Naruto!" Ino squealed ecstatically as she spotted him, dragging Shikamaru as if he hadn't intended on going over there

himself.

"Naruto!" she exclaimed in a sing-songy voice, "I've been looking *all* over for you."

Turning his eyes heavenwards, Shikamaru abandoned her side and took a stool next to Chouji, while Ino continued to gush in a flirtatious manner at Naruto. Naruto seemed completely oblivious to her presence, causing Ino's voice to become less sugary with each new word.

"What's with her?" Chouji asked while slurping up some ramen in a way that would have made an etiquette teacher pass out.

"Sakura's been behaving strangely, so Ino dragged me all over town following her so that we can find out what she's up to," Shikamaru replied, leaning back against the counter, "Women can be so troublesome!"

"No kidding!" Naruto agreed suddenly, looking over at Shikamaru and nodding seriously, "Sakura is the most troublesome of them all!"

Ino, who looked like she was about to explode at Naruto for ignoring her this entire time, had suddenly forgotten her anger as she leaned down to Naruto, peering at him intently, her eyes devious and wicked.

"Really?" she asked, sounding so aghast that it was obvious she was pretending, "Why? What did Sakura do?"

Shikamaru rolled his eyes at Ino's need for gossip but turned to Naruto with slight interest anyways, curious himself.

"Well, I went up to the hospital today to go and...er...give a talking to someone who really deserved it, but Sakura wouldn't let me," Naruto sulked, swinging his legs back and forth in a bored manner, "Said that he was her *patient* and I couldn't *bother* him. This guy has never

let any injury hold him down before, so why on earth couldn't I see him? I probably should have snuck in."

"Who were you trying to see?" Chouji asked, while Shikamaru put his chin in his palm.

"Can't tell you!" Naruto exclaimed proudly, "Tsunade-obaachan made me promise that I wouldn't tell *anyone* that Sasuke's back."

There was a stunned silence as everyone was trying to work out if Naruto had just given away the big secret or if he was making it up. The way he had revealed the information was so clichéd, that it seemed unlikely that anyone would ever make a mistake in exposing knowledge in that fashion. But taking into consideration that it was Naruto after all...the three of them quickly concluded that he was telling the truth—inadvertently.

"WHAT?!" Ino screeched so loudly that Naruto covered his ears. She looked like a blue-eyed demoness who had just crawled up from the depths of hell, Shikamaru observed, sweat-dropping, "Sasuke is back in Konoha and he's SAKURA'S PATIENT?!"

"Eh?" Naruto looked up at her and blinked a couple times in confusion, "If you knew already, then you just should have said so."

A tumbleweed blew by outside the shop with a dusty gust of wind, and there was an awkwardly dead silence—save for Ino's snarling.

"Why that little—" Ino promptly turned about and stormed out in the direction of the hospital, a diabolical aura pulsing around her, "Yeah right! Like I'm going to let Sasuke be *her* patient!"

"Aren't you going to stop her?" Chouji asked, turning towards Shikamaru questioningly as Ino griped to herself as she left, her fists clenching and unclenching. Shikamaru could have sworn her nails were now long and pointed.

"Ino's on a warpath," he shrugged, "To try and stop her now would be far too troublesome."

"Not to mention dangerous," Chouji grinned before ordering another ramen.

Shikamaru stared out after Ino for a second longer—he didn't know what it was, but despite her being absolutely unbearable, there was something about her that made him able to tolerate her. It was the strangest feeling... A cloud suddenly drifted across the sky and any thoughts that Shikamaru had were soon lost to distraction.

"Now, if you want to know who else is troublesome," Naruto was rambling on the other side of Chouji, "don't get me started on Kakashi-sensei."

"Tch," Sasuke scoffed quietly as the door to his room finally opened, his interrogator finally arriving.

The person who had just entered his room was late—extremely late, his internal clock told him; and Sasuke was not in the best of moods. Because of his interrogator's belatedness, he had grown extremely hungry, and was becoming more irritated by the minute.

"Kakashi," he said smoothly, his hands resting behind his head, not bothering to mask his displeasure at being kept waiting.

"My word," came the familiar laid-back and cheerful voice, "Sakura is doing a wonderful job in the rehabilitation if you can recognize people before they can even say a word!"

Sasuke found himself smirking, despite himself, "No...only you would be half an hour late for something like this."

"Only half an hour?" Kakashi sounded surprised, and Sasuke could picture his old sensei raising his eyebrows, "I thought it was more like an hour late. Hmmm. Tsunade-sama must have told me the

wrong time again. Honestly, she should learn to keep better track of her time."

Underneath his bandages, Sasuke rolled his eyes at Kakashi's statement. He blinked a couple times to ease the tiny sting that came to them as a result. He was starting to keep his eyes open when he was awake; it felt more natural—even though he couldn't see a thing.

"It seems that you've recovered quite a bit since I saw you last," Kakashi continued cheerily, brushing the matter of Tsunade's time keeping aside, "I don't know if anyone told you, but I was on the team that found you in the woods. You were extremely lucky, we almost thought that you were dead. We were quite worried for you."

Sasuke couldn't recall anything of the sort, having the scent of the cherry tree as his last clear memory, so he merely responded: "I'm sure."

"Sakura worked very hard on keeping you alive when you were brought in. The irony of it all is that she didn't even realize that it was you!" Kakashi's cheerful tone carrying on, "I heard she was quite shocked when she found out—"

"People have not yet been permitted to simply drop by to visit me," Sasuke interrupted, wanting to get the interrogation over with, "I assume then that there is a reason for you being here?"

"Ah yes," Kakashi said thoughtfully, "I almost forgot."

There was a bit off rustling, followed by the sound of a scroll unfurling. Kakashi cleared his throat, sounding like he was about to read a long segment from a reading.

"You, Uchiha Sasuke, are being held under crimes that you have committed against the village of Konoha—" Kakashi abruptly stopped and after a pause, "Let's just skip the pleasantries. Okay, first question: Where is Orochimaru's hideout located?"

The first question was the first that he could not answer. Sasuke sighed—it felt like it was going to be a long morning.

A/N: Secret's out, and Ino is not pleased; Huzzah for Kakashi and Naruto's second appearance; and upcoming rehabilitation fun! Btw, sorry for the lack of fluff between Sasuke and Sakura for those who are looking for it. It just isn't at that stage yet between them. Sasuke still had his mind set on revenge and the like, and while he trusts Sakura now—to some extent—he's still our cold Sasuke a.t.m.—but we all love him anyways, so that's okay.

Please review!

Drieldwin

Chapter 8

A/N: Thanks for all the reviews guys! *Almost* crossed two hundred reviews with just the previous chapter! Thanks for all your support; it was much more than I ever expected! I love all your comments; I am continually told that I've kept Sasuke beautifully in character, and I'm pleased to hear that. He's a fun character to write and work with, and I quite enjoy doing so—even if it is difficult at times.

Anyhow, chapter...eight! O.O! The good, the bad, and the frightening.

Chapter Eight: A Crafty Intruder and an Interfering Instructor

"Last question," Kakashi read off the scroll that he was holding in his lap, "Are you aware of any plans that Orochimaru was making to attack Konoha?"

A slight thoughtful frown appeared on the face of his old pupil as he searched his mind for an answer.

"I recall being talked to, or at least aware of a plan that may have included an attack against Konoha. I can't remember," Sasuke said after a moment, "My memory is faded when I try to think of when it would be, but I know that it wasn't going to be soon. It has probably been set back even further, now that his latest vessel has been rendered useless to him."

Kakashi scrawled some notes down on the scroll before rolling it up again, studying Sasuke's face. The Uchiha boy had been open about anything that he knew, and signs did indicate that parts of his memory was gone, but despite that, he had been helpful where he could—an odd virtue for Sasuke to demonstrate. Maybe he didn't know everything about the situation, Kakashi pondered, or maybe

there was a reason for him helping. To be rid of the sentence meant that he could leave Konoha...and the only reason he would leave Konoha...

"Sasuke."

"Aa?"

"You're not still bent on revenge, are you?" he asked a little worriedly. After all that had happened, surely now he still wouldn't...

"I am," he replied evenly and tersely.

A heavy sigh escaped Kakashi as he tucked the scroll safely away in the pouch that he carried his weapons and supplies in. He put his fingertips together and touched his index fingers to his lips.

"Is that very wise?" he asked after a moment, gazing perceptively at Sasuke with his visible eye.

"I've told nobody the exact circumstances under which I was blinded," Sasuke stated coldly, as an aside, "I was going to be taken as a vessel, and I knew that Orochimaru would most likely disrespect my wish of avenging the Uchiha clan. There was no escaping the fate that I had been branded with."

Kakashi noted that Sasuke rubbed the sealed curse mark on his neck as he said this. There was a reason behind his former pupil telling him this, and he listened respectfully to find out how it would be related back to his question.

"The only way out was if I was useless to him, and he would no longer want me as a vessel."

Sasuke paused and Kakashi felt his eyes widen in disbelief at what Sasuke was implying. Useless to Orochimaru? There had only been one way out...? Surely he hadn't...

"I blinded myself."

Kakashi sighed, "So that's how it is."

"As long as I am alive, I don't care what happens. I will kill Itachi and revive my clan. I did this solely so that I could escape from Orochimaru and fulfill my goals. No other reason but to survive."

There was a long silence. So he had after all—he had taken his own sight. In comparison to how he had looked when Kurenai had found him, he was in good condition, but that did not mean that he was in any position to still be pursuing his path for revenge. In his current state, he could never hope to dream of laying a scratch on Itachi. Even with training and time, the most he could become was mediocre, and that was simply not good enough to take on Sasuke's older brother. But he knew Sasuke would not be swayed in his opinion.

Kakashi stood wearily from his seat and tucked away the chair he had just gotten up off of. He faced Sasuke, not knowing what to do, "Hatred breeds sadness, Sasuke. Remember that."

Sasuke seemed to ignore his piece of advice, and continued like he hadn't spoken at all, "Don't tell Sakura."

Another grim pause.

"Alright then, I'll go give this information to the Hokage," Kakashi replied unenthusiastically, "And as you wish, I will not tell Sakura. I will, however, tell Tsunade-sama. It will then be up to her who finds out the information of how you came to be in your present state, with the exception of Sakura."

Sasuke nodded dumbly in response but said nothing more as Kakashi turned to leave.

"I hope you get well soon, Sasuke," Kakashi said before closing the door behind him.

' *In both mind and body,*' he added inwardly.

Ino threw open the doors to the hospital, feeling completely livid. The news that Sasuke was Sakura's patient had only sounded worse and worse the more she thought about it—and having the whole walk from the ramen stand to the hospital to think about it, it was very bad news indeed. She calmed herself after the doors had swung shut behind her, a few people staring at her as a result of her ostentatious entrance, and knowing that is she did not act lady-like, she would not be treated with respect, resulting in her being thrown from the building.

Candidly, as if nothing was wrong, she walked over the reception desk, trying to act natural, despite the curious stares from the people in the hospital lobby. The woman behind the desk turned towards her and gave a slight bow.

"How may I help you today?" she asked politely, though Ino realized that the woman probably thought that she was mentally unstable.

"Hi," she said, smiling sweetly, "I'm here to visit Uchiha Sasuke. I was wondering if you could tell me what room he's in?"

The receptionist turned to the computer on her desk and flicked through a few files, "Sorry miss, but we don't seem to have anyone by that name checked in."

Ino frowned; Sasuke was here—Naruto had said he confronted Sakura this morning and she had turned him away. If Naruto knew, and Sakura had not denied the claims, but merely sent him from the vicinity, then the facts were most likely true—therefore the receptionist was lying.

"Well, then perhaps I could see Haruno Sakura?" she asked, just as politely, but an icy undertone escaped her.

"I'm sorry," the receptionist smiled brightly, but an annoyed edge was laced in the reply, "Haruno Sakura is very busy at the moment and I don't know when she will be available next."

Ino growled mentally to herself—she was going to see Sasuke by tomorrow at the very latest. There had to be a way in which she could find out what room he was in. Shikamaru was smart and quick on his feet—think like Shikamaru, think of an underhanded and devious plot. An idea came to her and she quickly made some hand gestures behind the other side of the desk, where the receptionist couldn't see her. She hadn't marched all the way up here only have her trip turn out fruitless.

"Oh, that's too bad—" she told the receptionist in a saddened tone, finishing up the last few hand signals behind the desk, completing the jutsu. There was a minor rushing sensation as her soul was torn from her body and flung into that of the young receptionist.

She entered the receptionist's mind instantly, just in time to watch her own body fall to the side, landing on the floor with a flump. Ino stood up in the receptionist's body hastily, trying to act as natural as she could. She needed a distraction so that her body would not look suspicious. After all, having an unconscious body going unnoticed at the foot of one's desk was very out of place indeed, especially if the person behind said desk wasn't doing a thing about it.

"Oh my goodness!" she exclaimed at her soulless body, "Are you alright?"

A couple of medics were standing nearby and they turned towards the sound of Ino's (the receptionist's) voice. She quickly waved them over, hoping that nobody would recognize the jutsu that she had cast on the receptionist and figure out what she was up to. The two medics rushed over and bent over her body, calling at her, checking for responses.

Ino smirked from behind the receptionist's face and quickly sat down, scanning the monitor of the computer while the medics concerned themselves with her body. Making use of the distraction, she flicked through the different windows, hoping that she would at least find something before she knew that she had to release the jutsu. Luckily for her, there was a file open on Sasuke—' **Rm: 221** ' was printed

boldly at the top of it. Having gotten the information she had needed, she quickly released her hold on the young woman she had been inhabiting, the familiar grabbing sensation hurling her back into her own body. A confused noise came from the receptionist as she regained control, having no idea what was going on.

Ino blinked her eyes open slowly, pretending to be confused over what happened. Staring up at the two medic ninja she squinted slightly, forcing her eyes to bring them in and out of focus.

"Are you alright?" one of the medics asked her as she slowly sat up, holding her head like she had a headache, a groan escaping her.

"Yeah..." she murmured tiredly, as the other medic helped her to her feet.

"What happened?" the receptionist asked sounding confused.

"She fainted," one of the two medics replied, mistaking the receptionist's literal question and interpreting as she was asking what happened to Ino.

"Perhaps you had better go lie down," one of the medics spoke kindly to Ino, who nodded dumbly.

She smirked inwardly as the medic led her into the main part of the hospital, a supportive arm wrapped around her. Now that she knew what room Sasuke was in, it wouldn't be difficult to sneak away and go pay him a visit after the medics had left her to rest. She kept up the façade about being tired and confused, acting like she had no idea why she had fainted. This was going to work out nicely...

"Well, then" Sasuke heard Sakura announce as she opened the door to his room, "How did the questioning go?"

He slowly sat up as she asked the question and shrugged in response. Other than not being able to answer about a third of them,

it hadn't been too bad. He supposed worse people than Kakashi could have come and demanded answers out of him—he was actually quite surprised that the Hokage hadn't sent ANBU in for the job, but that would probably come eventually. When the Hokage had talked to him the other day, she sounded skeptical when he told her of his erased memories—there would probably be some ANBU who would double and triple check the validity of his claims.

"Sorry it took so long, but you know how Kakashi-sensei is," there were the familiar soft footsteps that indicated she was drawing near to him, "I bet you're feeling pretty hungry at this point."

"A little," he said with indifference, even though he was ravenous. His stomach decided to contradict his words at that moment by grumbling loudly—he felt the back of his neck get warm.

A quiet giggle could be heard from Sakura and it sounded somewhat stifled, Sasuke decided to ignore her and pulled back the covers of his bed, swinging his legs over the edge.

"Well, your body seems to think otherwise," she said with a gentle laugh, "Come on, let's go down to the cafeteria."

Standing up, he braced his feet against the floor, the familiar dizziness coming to his head as he stood, his perception completely thrown off. Sakura came and took his arm carefully and he felt the world steady slightly, as he let her hold onto him without complaint. They adjusted the position as he bent his arm at the elbow and offered it to her, allowing her to link her arm with his. He was reminded of the way lovers walked arm in arm down the streets of Konoha and firmly brushed the thought aside. To anyone who didn't understand the situation it would appear that they were a couple, but he didn't care what strangers thought—and his old acquaintances would soon come to know of the circumstances anyways.

Sakura led him out into the hall, carefully leading him through the doorway, and he remembered with embarrassment how hard the doorframe had felt against his head—he was not in a hurry to repeat

that accident again. She led him on carefully and certainly, not letting him crash into anything, and leading him out of the way when medics passed by them. Sometimes he lost his footing, stumbling on occasion, and he found his other hand grasping her arm reflexively, to keep him from falling. Not once had she let him fall, and he found that navigating was easier when she helped him.

"Things may seem a little wobbly right now, but eventually you'll be able to get around without becoming dizzy. You're doing great so far, but you've only been here for two days, and while you have grown used to this a bit, it's not going to go away any time soon," she was telling him now as they turned around the corner to where he remembered the elevator being, "Don't forget that while getting around at the smooth-floored hospital isn't that bad, elsewhere is another matter."

"For example?" he asked her, not really knowing what to say to her. He wasn't too good at conversation, only saying what he needed to, nothing else.

"Like the pavement on the streets is rough," Sakura responded contemplatively, "and old cobblestones have all these protruding edges."

"I see."

"But I'm glad that you've gotten hold of the basics," she told him in a cheerful tone, "Apart from dizziness, lack of perception and knowledge of your location, you're doing very well as far as moving around goes. You don't seem to have any difficulty eating with chopsticks, either."

Sasuke smirked inwardly at himself, remembering the first meal they had brought him. Luckily they had assumed he would be fine on his own, so he was alone when he had been eating and poking himself with the food he was trying to insert into his mouth. He had always used his sight to somewhat visually gauge where he should stick the end of his chopsticks, automatically compensating for different

lengths. Not being able to see how long they were, he had misjudged the length and ended up jabbing himself. Eventually he had gotten a grasp on it, and didn't prod himself for the rest of the meal, but he had had to use the napkins to wipe off any rice on his face.

Sakura came to a halt and he stopped abruptly as a result, automatically reaching to brace himself against her, but he merely heard the quiet beep that signified she had pushed the button for the elevator.

"Now, tell me," she said as there was a quiet 'ping' indicating that the elevator arrived, "What would you like for lunch?"

Sasuke entered the elevator, being cautious not to trip as he entered, and thought for a moment. He didn't really care what he was given to eat, as long as he was given something.

"Anything's fine," he replied, shrugging slightly, "Just nothing sweet."

Ino stood dejectedly in front of her mother at the counter in the flower shop, the familiar fragrant aroma seeming irritating today instead of soothing. This was not what she had hoped would happen, as it was a terrible inconvenience on her part. Standing next to her talking to her mother was Kakashi-sensei, his hand resting supportively on her shoulder to keep her from tipping over if she fainted. Mentally she cursed her luck with every profane word she could think of; she had been so close too...

" Perhaps you had better go lie down," one of the medics spoke kindly to Ino, who nodded dumbly.

She smirked inwardly as one of the medics led her into the main part of the hospital, a supportive arm wrapped around her. Keeping up the façade, Ino allowed herself to wobble as she walked, and forced herself to stumble gracelessly about. This was going to work, she told herself confidently.

" Huh?"

Ino looked up in a dreary manner, peering carefully at the person she and the medic had just run into. There was a man before them with wild silver hair and his forehead protector covering one eye; a dark mask coved the lower half of his face. His visible eye looked surprised and the eyebrow was raised high above it in a confused manner. Ino recognized him as Sakura's sensei, Hatake Kakashi. She frowned inwardly, wondering if he had been in to see Sasuke too.

" Yamanaka Ino?" Kakashi said questioningly at her sickly appearance, "Are you okay?"

The medic looked up at Kakashi, "Do you know her?"

" She's the student of a co-worker," Kakashi replied, scratching the back of his head, looking at her in a confused manner, "What happened?"

" She passed out at reception," the medic replied, readjusting the grip on her arm a little.

" I know where she lives, I could take her home, let her mother watch over her for a bit," Kakashi volunteered smiling up at the medic, "I'm sure that there is a more sickly patient that could use the bed you were to put her in, and I'm sure the comfort of her own bed would be preferable."

" Alright, thank you," the medic nodded, loosening the grip on her arm, letting Kakashi come over and support her, "Be careful, alright miss?"

" Hai..." she mumbled wearily, but she was actually raving angrily in her mind, a long constant string of swearwords running through her head.

"Fainted?" her mother was now exclaiming in shock, "Ino, you shouldn't get so excited, it does strange things to your blood pressure! Go lie down for a little bit."

Ino sighed quietly and mumbled a quick agreement, plodding to the back of the store, "Thank you, Kakashi-sensei, for bringing me home."

"Anytime, Ino," he smiled under his mask and waved cheerily at her before Ino disappeared into the back.

She had been so close! If she hadn't run into Kakashi, then maybe she would have ended up seeing Sasuke! But becoming frustrated over something that couldn't be helped wouldn't get her anywhere. She sighed in a Shikamaru-like fashion and trudged up the stairs, turning her eyes heavenwards. How on earth did Shikamaru manage to work around predicaments like these? If she had had his brain, she wondered, would she be inside that hospital right now talking to Sasuke at this very moment?

"How troublesome," she found herself muttering as she closed the door to her room.

Reminding Sasuke of the rough edge between the elevator and floor, Sakura led him carefully outside. She was infinitely more impressed with his cooperation and was actually having a pleasant time chatting with him. While their 'conversation' was simple, it was more of a conversation she had ever had with Sasuke previous this time. Leading him by the arm, she walked to the right this time, opposite the gardens and was about to enter a hallway that led to the cafeteria when someone called out to her.

"Sakura!"

Stopping, she felt Sasuke jolt slightly as he always did when she halted, and she looked over her shoulder. The receptionist behind

the desk, Maeko, was waving her over, a worried expression on her face.

"Stay here for a moment," Sakura instructed Sasuke, leading him over to a wall so that he could rest his hand against it, "I'll be back in a second."

Once she was sure that Sasuke was not overcome by unsteadiness, she turned about and walked over to the desk, a questioning look on her face. The receptionist looked quite concerned.

"Sakura, something happened about twenty minutes ago that I thought I should bring to your attention," Maeko said nervously as Sakura stopped in front of the desk, "I was about to send someone for you, but that won't be necessary now."

"What happened?" she asked, resting her arms on the high desk, a frown coming to her face.

"Well, a girl with long blonde hair—that was held up in a ponytail—and blue eyes came in, asking to see Uchiha Sasuke," she told Sakura seriously, fidgeting uncertainly, "When I told her that nobody was registered under that name, she asked for you. I told her that you were busy, knowing that the news of Uchiha Sasuke's return is supposed to remain secret, however after that I don't remember what happened."

Sakura's frown deepened as the receptionist continued.

"The next thing I knew, there were two medics helping her off the floor—apparently while I had, I don't know...zoned out, she had fainted," Maeko finished, "They were going to take her to a room to lie down, but then Hatake Kakashi showed up and took her home. I just thought I should tell you about the girl who wanted to see your patient."

Sakura sighed heavily, slightly angry but knew that her irritation would come to nothing, "Thank you, Maeko; what you told me was

very important. I want you to arrange it to have Sasuke's room moved please, preferably to another floor all together—is there anything left on the fifth floor?"

"The fifth floor?" Sakura could understand the receptionist's confusion. The fifth floor's rooms were reserved for severe and extremely abnormal cases. Only medical ninja were permitted up on the fifth floor and a special card key was needed in order to access it. If there were to be any visitors, they had to be specially escorted by a medic, "There are two rooms available: one next door to the staff lounge, and one down the hall and around the corner from the elevator."

"Put him in the one next to the staff lounge," Sakura said after a moment's consideration, "Thank you for doing this."

"Of course," the woman smiled up at her.

"Also, I wouldn't be surprised if that young woman came back. If she enters the hospital, let me know before she approaches reception," Sakura told her as she thought of a plan in her head, "She'll have some sort of excuse to come into the hospital. Allow her to do so; I'll deal with the rest."

"Alright I will," Sakura smiled down at Maeko, glad that there were such helpful and kind people in the world, unlike Ino who was completely meddling and irritating.

"Arigato," Sakura said thankfully, giving a respectful bow, "Now, I have a patient who is probably *im* patiently waiting my return. Ja ne!"

Walking back over to Sasuke, she thought about what the receptionist had said. The description of the girl who had come inquiring about Sasuke was most likely Ino—it seemed like Naruto had leaked the secret already, which was much quicker than she had anticipated. The lapse in Maeko's memory was most definitely Ino's mind transfer jutsu, and Ino's fainting spell only enforced the theory.

She came up to Sasuke, who had taken up leaning on the wall to look less out of place.

"We have a problem," she told him with a sigh.

He straightened up and offered her his arm, which she took, not really paying too much attention as she led him down the hall again.

"A problem?" he asked her, his voice betraying no hints of emotion save for the questioning tone.

"Well, word's out on the street that you're back," she replied, frowning in displeasure, "Ino apparently came and tried to pay you a visit, and when she was not permitted in, she fainted."

"Fainted?" he echoed without conviction.

"It's her mind-transfer jutsu, I'm sure of it," Sakura growled to herself, "I have no idea how much information she managed to get, if any. However, I have a feeling that she'll be back, and will at least try and find out what room you're in. I'm having you moved to another room on the fifth floor, that can only be accessed by visitors if they have an escort staff."

"Naruto has a loud mouth," Sasuke muttered to himself in a displeased manner.

"I'll say," Sakura growled in agreement, "I mean I knew they would eventually find out, but I didn't think that soon. You've only been here for three days."

"Aa."

"So, here's the question. We can't keep you here forever; there are other people who may need the space you're occupying, so as soon as you're well, I'm taking you home," Sakura continued with a resigning sigh, "But that won't be for another couple days at the very most...and there will be people wanting to see you in the meantime."

It's up to you to decide when you want visitors, if at all. I can try, but I don't know if I will be able to hold them all off until you're released. After all, these are ninja we're dealing with."

There was a long pause as Sasuke thought things over, and Sakura led him a long patiently, knowing not to push him, because he was going to give her an answer eventually. She led him past a few more corridors and into the cafeteria, nodding in acknowledgment at a few acquaintances that she passed, before joining the noon line for food. Sasuke didn't stop nearly as abruptly this time, seeming to have gotten slightly used to the practice at this point.

"I suppose it is inevitable," he growled quietly as Sakura examined the food, preparing a list to offer Sasuke, "I don't want to see anyone today...but if it comes to it, I'll be willing to see people tomorrow but only after I've seen Naruto."

Inner Sakura flinched at the mention of 'seeing' people, while outer Sakura turned her head away from the different sandwiches, salads and desserts, "Naruto?"

A ghost of a smile came to Sasuke's face, "The dobe needs a lecture for opening his loud mouth."

Sakura giggled in response, glad to see that there was a small smile on Sasuke's face. She didn't think that she had ever seen any other kind of smile from him before—he had always had that small crooked grin, and she couldn't recall the last time she had seen him laugh.

"I'll have it arranged," she smiled at him, "Any particular time that you want to see him?"

"I want him in and out before you start healing my eyes," he replied curtly.

"Okay," she said with a nod that he couldn't see, before looking over at the food again, deciding to take a salad that she could see from

where they were at the line. She opened her mouth to ask Sasuke what he wanted when he inadvertently cut her off.

"Sakura," he said in a cautious tone, as if struggling with whether he should be speaking or not, "...There's something else... I want to ask you something."

A/N: Blargh! Chapter eight ended on an abrupt note. Sorry about that :p

You know where that periwinkle blue button is... ;)

Terminology:

Dobe : literally 'dead last', but could probably be better interpreted as 'loser'.

Chapter 9

A/N: My editor came over for supper on Saturday and my mom made a fruit salad for dessert composed of kiwi fruit and mangos. I exclaimed delightedly: 'mango kiwi!' There was a pause between my editor and I as we both thought of 'Mangekyou', and then we both subsequently died inside. I'll never be able to say the words mango and kiwi in that order again. x.x Damn Itachi for giving me traumatizing connotations. (shakes fist)

Hmm, what are the chances? This is being posted on Sakura's birthday... Okay, so I guess this chapter is in honor of that event! Even though I didn't intend for it to end up that way :p

p.s. Thanks for the 10 000 hits, and the 230+ reviews, guys!

Chapter Nine: The Shoehorn, the Kunai and Hot Chocolate

"Hopefully over lunch the room will have been prepared," Sakura told Sasuke in a thoughtful manner, "I really want to get the new rehab started, we've already lost a day with the curse mark and all, it would really be bothersome if the room wasn't ready."

Sasuke said nothing to this, but merely listened to the closing door of the elevator, as it rumbled shut. At his side, he felt Sakura pull away from him for a moment, and there was a quick swish followed by the 'ping' of the floor button.

"The fifth floor can only be accessed with a key card specific to this hospital," Sakura said to him, explaining the soft swiping noise, "While Ino has access to one of the card keys herself, from working in the pharmaceutical branch, she doesn't yet know that you have been moved to another location—and the files still state that you are in room two twenty-one. As for the rest of your visitors—unless they

are willing to scale the hospital walls, there should be no way that they can get to you."

"Naruto would attempt the hospital walls," he stated, a smirk on his lips, and Sakura laughed. There was a musical tone to her laugh that had a softer ring to it, a nice kind of laugh.

"Well, hopefully he won't try anything before tomorrow," she replied, a humorous note in her voice, "I gave him a firm talking to this morning; he seemed pretty dejected by the time he reached the end of the hall."

The elevator blundered to a halt and the doors slid open. Clinging to Sakura too much for his own liking, he allowed her to lead him from the small compartment and onto the new floor. It was quieter where they were, and he assumed it was because on the fifth floor only special cases were admitted, and therefore less people.

"Your room is just over here," Sakura said brightly as she led him a short distance before slowing to open the door to a nearby room, "Oh good—the room is prepared. Well, this should be good for starting the new exercise today, seeing as you're in a new location and don't have any idea what is where."

"What are we going to do?" he asked her without emotion, wondering how a new room could help him in the least.

"I'm going to describe it for you," she replied happily, "Now, I'm no writer, so sorry if my description is lousy."

She cleared her throat slightly, "Well, um... the room is on the east end of the hospital—so right now we're facing east. There's a medium-sized window right before us in the far wall, and a bed is resting beneath it. There's a small table by the head of the bed with a small lamp resting on top, a small vase with a fresh flower in it resting off to the corner.

"Off to our left there's a small room that's the bathroom, and from what I can see the sink and toilet are on the right hand side of the door, the shower is most likely in the back left corner. On our right, there is a counter that has a few tools and trinkets lying on it, but nothing really worth mentioning. There's a series of cupboards mounted onto the wall above the counter and other than extra supplies—I don't think there's anything in there.

"If you want details, the ceiling is undecorated, except for the florescent lighting, the floor is well polished and has an alternating pattern of matching tiles, and the curtains over the window are simply dreadful—they're rather old and are plain white."

Sasuke let her words paint a mental picture in his head so that he could see the room somewhat in his head. He knew that he would probably have a chance to get used to the area after a couple days of staying in it, filling in any details that she had missed. She had been thorough in her description, even telling him what the drapes for the window had looked like.

"I hope that was okay," she said tentatively, seeking approval.

"It was thorough," he acknowledged evenly, "but you're no novelist, Sakura."

"Sorry about that," she replied lightly, and from the tone of her voice, he could tell she was smiling.

"What did you have planned this afternoon?" he inquired, talking a step forward to let her know that he wanted to go and sit on the bed.

He was carefully led over to the edge and he let go of her arm as he sat down on the mattress—noting that it was no softer than the previous one.

"Well," he heard her setting something down on the nightstand—most likely a bag of sorts—and withdrawing a few items from within it. Sitting down on the edge of his bed, he heard a small clattering as

she scattered them out between them, "I have here an assortment of different items that were taken from your home."

"My home?" he raised an inquisitive eyebrow, "You took things from my house?"

"I actually cleaned the whole place four days ago," she replied as if it were the most normal thing in the world to do—but Sasuke could hear a small tone of nervousness in her voice, she was afraid he would be angry with her.

He didn't know he felt about her going through the things in his house. He supposed he was a little affronted by the notion, and had a sense of violation of privacy on top of that, but he wasn't exactly angry. She was going to be living with him for a while after he was released from the hospital; she was going to end up in his house eventually.

"Why did you clean it?" he asked after a moment, deciding not to dwell on the issue, "The jounin group hadn't even found me."

"I don't know," she replied sounding somewhat confused and baffled—either she was confused by her own actions or she was confused by his lack of annoyance.

He wondered what state she had found the house in when she had entered. To be honest, he hadn't lived there since they graduated from the academy—he had rented a small apartment and lived there after they had become genin.

"I suppose it was just a spur of the moment thing," she laughed nervously, "I'm not really sure what made me do it."

"What about my apartment?"

"Oh, well, that was raided after you left," she replied uncertainly, still sounding confused by his composed reaction, "to see if you had had any long-term dealings with Orochimaru... I don't know what

happened after that, but I know that your things were then removed and dumped in the Uchiha manor. Something about the landlady wanting her apartment back."

"I see," he replied after a moments pause—it seemed that he would be living back in his former home after all, even if he had hoped avoiding doing so at all costs. He supposed it couldn't be helped, but of course he was *not* going to mention anything to Sakura about it, "We seem to have strayed from the topic of rehabilitation."

"Right," Sakura responded after a moment, sounding like she had gotten over the fact that he was not going to be angry with her, "Well, I took these things from your home in hopes that you will be able to recognize them easier. That's part of what we'll be doing—using your touch to identify certain objects. Then there's this—"

She took his hand in hers and brushed her thumb over the back of it like she had done earlier, sweeping his knuckles lightly. He nodded in return as he remembered his pledge of trust to her, and hers to him.

"Every time I grab your hand, I'll touch your hand like that," she explained, "Your brain will eventually associate that action with me, and then I can grab your hand and you'll know it's me without having to say anything. This can come in handy on missions when we have to remain silent, it will help you recognize that it's me, not an enemy behind you. From now on, I'll always perform that action, so if someone grabs your hand and fails to give you the recognizable sign, you'll know it's not me."

He snickered softly, "What if you forget?"

"I won't forget," her voice was teasing, "But if I do, you have permission to demand who I am and what I'm doing grabbing your hand."

"I'll hold you to that," he said in reply, finding himself smirking in return, though he had no idea why.

"You'll be disappointed if you want to yell at me," she countered, laughing lightly, "Anyways, lets get on with the exercise, shall we?"

He held out his hand as she put a strange, long object in his open palms.

"Tell me what it is," she told him, getting that professional tone in her voice, "My bet is that you won't have a clue what it is."

The corner of his lip twitched a little in amusement—like he was going to lose a bet.

They spent the rest of the afternoon examining different items from his home. Sasuke had managed to recognize all of them—and Sakura had lost the bet, as he correctly identified the first item as a shoehorn. He hadn't even realized that he had owned a shoehorn, or that his family had at least—that's why it had taken him a few minutes to distinguish what the curved strip of plastic had been. After the shoehorn she had handed him a feather duster, followed by a marble statuette carved in the shape of a pop-eyed goldfish.

As the objects came through his hands, he found himself actually having fun. It was almost like a game of sorts, and it hardly seemed like training—but the fact that he realized it was training allowed him to feel like he was putting good use to his time. Sometimes when Sakura put an extremely bizarre object in his hands, she would let out a musical laugh at the expression that would come across his face and dare him to guess what it was.

Some of the objects were dead giveaways, like the pair of scissors or the wooden spoon that had come over his palms, but others were more difficult like the shoehorn had been—a small salt dish had been an example. It had been a small little pot, no bigger than his palm, and was completely smooth inside and out, no specific markings to hint at what it was for. It was only after he had sniffed it and detected the slight scent of salt that he recognized it as the small salt jar that his mother had kept in the kitchen for her cooking.

Time had erased the recollections of some of the objects that Sakura procured, but she had managed to bring some items that stirred memories that had all but been forgotten. The salt jar in the kitchen, or the goldfish statuette that he recalled had sat on his mother's dresser. There had been an old wooden pipe that brought back the memory of his father telling him that it had once belonged to his grandfather. It was amazing what stood out clear in his mind, and what had been forgotten—different memories treasured, while others had been discarded. He didn't know how he felt about the reminders of his past; it made him remember the times he had with his parents, and it also made him feel somber too.

"Okay, this is the last one," Sakura announced and he held out his hands expectantly.

Something cold and heavy was dropped neatly in to his hands. He felt it with his fingertips, tracing the edges of the object, noting its texture and bulk. It was cool to the touch, and was made out of metal; one end was long and pointed, with sharp edges and pointed corners, while the other end was clearly a handle, a ring at the end for fastening to a belt or pouch.

"It's a kunai," he told her, holding it out for her to take again, "That one was a little too obvious."

"Oh, I was expecting you to be able to recognize it," she replied, a mischievous hint in her voice, but she did not take back the kunai, "You would lose all my respect for you as a ninja if you didn't realize it was a kunai. But this one is special. Tell me what makes it different from a regular kunai."

He paused for a moment then turned the kunai over in his hands once again. The balance of blade to hilt was fine; the edges were sharp and well kept; the handle was smooth and unused from what he could tell. It was when he ran his fingertips over the flat of the blade that Sasuke came across something unusual.

"There's something written on the side," he said as his fingers ran over the grooves the formed the characters.

"Can you tell me what it says?" she asked him, "It's okay if you can't—I don't expect your fingers to be that sensitive yet, but..."

Running his fingers over the edges, he felt for familiar shapes, something that would give him some indication as to what was written. After a few moments he managed to discern the segment, but while the second part was slightly familiar, he could not make out what it said.

"This part," he told her, brushing his thumb over the interpreted sections, "says 'Uchiha'. The second part I can't quite make out."

"It says: 'Fugaku'," Sakura replied kindly, "Was that the name of your father?"

"Hai..." he replied slowly, holding the kunai in his hands.

He remembered that kunai, now that he realized what it was. His father had shown it to him once, saying that he had inherited one from his own father when he came of age.

You'll receive this one when you are old enough, Sasuke. And when you have children of your own, you'll give them a kunai with your name inscribed upon it. Such the Uchiha have done for generations.

The pride he had felt back then, knowing that he would receive that kunai from his father was indescribable. Itachi had already gotten his, and he had been very jealous, but he knew that he would get his own kunai from his father one day, and that was good enough for him.

But that day had never come.

He closed his hands over the kunai, holding it tightly within his palms, so firmly that it bordered on cutting into his fingers.

"Sasuke?" he heard Sakura say timidly after a few moments, "Is something wrong?"

"lie," he replied shortly, sounding colder than he had intended to. After a moment he loosened the grasp on the kunai and offered it back to Sakura, "Take good care of it when you're returning it back to my house."

He felt the fingers of her hand brush gently over his palms as she took the kunai back. "Of course," her voice was tender.

"Arigato," he responded, and rested his arms on his knees.

"I can be extra careful with the shoehorn too, if you want," she said after a minute, her voice playful again.

He smirked slightly, "That won't be necessary."

It was mid-evening when Sakura left the hospital, and she walked cheerfully down the road, down towards the old Uchiha neighborhood, humming a tune and resisting the urge to start skipping down the street. She had felt that the afternoon had gone infinitely better than it had the previous day and she was in a good mood as a result. Of course she could tell that Sasuke had was still having issues with his pride, but he had been more open to her touch today, and while she wouldn't say he'd entirely warmed up to her yet, he wasn't the cold fish he had been before.

She was rather pleased with the progress they had made—the afternoon walk had gone well, and they actually had a *real* conversation at lunch, it had been over something unimportant, but the fact that she could at least talk about something was a step forward. The exercise they had gone through most of the afternoon had been fun, and she couldn't help but smile to herself as she thought that Sasuke probably had enjoyed himself too. He had even smiled a couple times—as much of a smile as you could get from him—and she had found herself teasing him a little like she did to

Naruto. Sasuke had done well with the item identification, she supposed she would have to find some more difficult items for him to identify.

But then there had been the kunai she had handed him that had been engraved with his father's name. That had held significance of some sorts, and she wondered curiously to herself what memories a simple engraved weapon had stirred up in his mind. True to her promise, she was taking extra good care of it, and now she was on her way back to his house to carefully replace his belongings where she had found them.

On her way, she contemplated a number of things. Sasuke's request that he made at noon was the first thing that drifted to her mind, knowing that it was a tremendous blow to his dignity to even ask her to do what he wanted her to do. It was almost cowardly, and that's what made it even more of a harder request to ask Sakura.

Her thoughts also touched briefly on Ino's intrusion into the hospital that afternoon. She knew how to deal with it, but she knew it was most likely going to be ugly, and she was *not* looking forward to that. She wasn't surprised that Ino hadn't been admitted into the hospital, even though—after a year of training under Tsunade, followed by an apprenticeship to Shikamaru's father—she had become a quite talented and notable pharmacist. However, her background did not give her the right to pry into events that were going on in the hospital—they were completely different branches, and other than the exchange of medications, the hospital and pharmacy did not concern each other with the other's business. Sakura sighed, Inner Sakura making a list of comebacks that she could throw at her ex-best friend.

Well, Ino, she supposed—in a weird way—was still her best friend, despite them getting on one another's nerves and constantly being at each other's throats. It was a strange friendship in which each knew that they could count on the other to be there for them even though they always were arguing. After Sasuke had left Konoha, she had been very thankful for Ino's support—even though it seemed

downright cruel to anyone who didn't know the situation. Nothing felt better than verbally insulting your best friend in order to get over a crisis. They never meant it cruelly, and even though it appeared that way, there was always a kinder, underlying hint that got the message across. That was how their friendship worked.

Arriving in front of the neighborhood where the Uchihas had lived, Sakura laid her hand on her closed bag, thinking of the contents inside. Again she wondered the significance of the kunai—she hadn't been able to bring herself to ask him while they ate dinner. She walked nonchalantly down the street, knowing that she would not get any answers now, if ever. And after a few minutes, she arrived in front of the old manor, the old building seeming to stand completely apart from the rest of the neighborhood. There were less people about than usual and she jumped the fence nimbly without being seen. Pushing through the brambles, she came around back, crawling up onto the porch.

Sliding the door open she entered the empty house, the darkness seeming to cloak her in a menacing way. The lights didn't work because it had been years since Sasuke had paid his electricity bill for the house. She was lucky that the water was still running when she cleaned the house, because it would have made it ten times more difficult if there had been no water. Walking down the semi-familiar halls, she opened her bag and took out the first few items, putting them back in place. The kunai she rested gently on the stand it had been placed on in a weapons cabinet that had been filled with many blades of formidable size and sharpness.

She was replacing the last item, the feather duster, into a hall closet when something caught her eye. Lying on the shelf directly in front of her was a shallow box marked 'music' on the side. Curious, she took the box down from the shelf and sat down on the floor, removing the lid carefully. Inside there were a number of yellowed sheets of paper—sheet music—and a music book lay at the bottom. The notes were all hand written, and maybe had been composed by Sasuke's

mother. Intrigued, she lifted the first sheet out of the box, holding it in the fading light cast through a window nearby and read the title.

Experimental Tune #9

A strange title, she thought to herself, perhaps this was a song that the composer had thought of and had wished to edit it later. Having taken some music classes when she was training as a kunoichi, she hummed the different notes to herself. It was a very pretty melody, light and uplifting, but it did need a little work. She set the sheet neatly aside and rifled through the other papers.

Most of the papers were sheet music, all hand written and composed by someone in the household, and as Sakura discovered in a bit from one of the first sheets of music, they were indeed composed by Sasuke's mother. Sometimes she would hum the tune of different pieces, if they were not too difficult, or if an interesting title caught her eye—as was one such case when she came across two of the oldest sheets in the box.

The older of the two did not interest her much, but it was the other that caused her interest to pique. The paper was old and somewhat yellowed, the words written at the top were almost gone, but the black ink that marked the page stood out clearly.

Sasuke

That was all that was written on at the very top of the page, and underneath in brackets, scribbled in faded pencil was the word 'lullaby'. Sakura glanced at the older piece, and Itachi's name was written on it, but ignoring it she set it aside and looked at the piece that Sasuke's mother had written for her youngest son. She experimentally hummed the first few bars of the melody, noting how it was in a minor key, the melody beautiful and soft, yet melancholy in a way that lulled Sakura into a peaceful state of being, but left her tinted with a trace of sorrow.

She finished humming the tune before gathering up the papers and restoring them back in the box, she prepared herself to leave the household, her cheerful mood dissipated into a somber one, the box of music giving her heap of things to think about.

It wasn't until much later in the evening that Sakura finally found herself home at the doorstep, opening the door and wandering in wearily. Setting her bag down by the door, she kicked off her shoes and entered her house. About to plod up the stairs and go to bed, despite it being only around nine in the evening, she was halted by a call.

"Sakura?" she heard her mother call, "Is that you?"

Stopping and turning about, she walked into the kitchen instead, finding her mother sitting at the table, a steaming mug of hot chocolate in her hands.

"My word!" her mother exclaimed, looking shocked at her daughter's appearance, "I hardly recognized you Sakura! It seems like ages since I last saw you!"

"Ha, ha," Sakura replied dryly, sitting down at the table with a sigh.

"Long day at work?" her mother asked concernedly but Sakura just shook her head, "Need some hot chocolate?"

She looked up at her mother, and smiled half-heartedly, "Actually, I think I'd rather enjoy that."

Her mother nodded and stood. Taking a mug from the cupboard she went and poured some hot water into it from the kettle and reached for the container of hot chocolate mix.

"I've hardly seen you the last couple days, Sakura," her mother said warmly, dumping a spoonful of the mix into the mug, "What has kept you so busy up at the hospital lately?"

Sakura felt like she had had the wind knocked out of her—she had forgotten to tell her family all about Sasuke! Not that she cared what her brother thought about it, or felt that her father was around enough to concern him with it, but she had forgotten to tell her mother. She folded her arms on the table and dropped her head down in them, groaning loudly at her own absentmindedness.

"Um, Mom?" she began, her words muffled from her face buried in her arms, "Do you remember Uchiha Sasuke?"

Her mother's confused reply came from somewhere nearby as there was the slight 'thunk' of the mug being set before her, "That boy that you were head-over-heels for? Yes, I remember. Didn't he leave the village?"

Sakura sat up and pulled her hot chocolate closer to her. "Yeah, he did," she replied in a preoccupied manner, "This is kinda a secret, but three days ago, he was found in terrible condition and brought back here."

"Oh dear," her mother murmured quietly. Whether it was because of Sasuke's condition, or if she was concerned about how her daughter was taking the matter, Sakura didn't know.

"Yeah, well..." Sakura stirred her hot chocolate slowly, waiting for it to cool so that she could drink it without burning herself, "He's been blinded...and I offered to rehabilitate him."

Her mother took a sip of hot chocolate, peering at her daughter perceptively, "I see."

"So that's what I've been doing for the past couple days," she continued without being asked, "It's fairly routine, and it can be fun sometimes, though he is still as stubborn as he was as a kid."

"Well, as long as he's not treating you badly, I guess I'm alright with the state of affairs," her mother said after a moment, "How do you

feel about the situation? You seem to have lost a bit of your usual pep."

"I'm still peppy, Mom," Sakura smiled faintly, using her mother's description of her personality, "You just see me when I've come home exhausted from chakra expenditure. But don't worry about me, I'm happy with what I'm doing right now, I don't think there is any more of a satisfying job than helping someone you care about. I feel I am where I should be."

Her mother was silent for a moment, seeming deep in thought, "Sakura, I know I told you many times that even though you care about someone so much, things don't always work out. Things may have turned in your favor, but—"

"I know," Sakura replied, staring at the steaming mug of chocolate liquid, "I know he doesn't return any feelings that I've ever had for him, so I'm just trying to be helpful. I promised him that I would do my best to be..."

"I'll just be glad when this is over," her mother sighed with relief, "After all, isn't he a criminal?"

"Tsunade-sama is going to lighten his sentence if he gives us information—so far he's been cooperative," Sakura replied, daring to take a sip from the mug her mother had set out for her, "My hopes is that he will be cooperative enough so that he will be pardoned; as far as I know, he hasn't done anything to betray Konoha other than seeking power from our enemy."

From over the rim of her glass, Sakura saw her mother purse her lips in disapproval—Sakura's mother had a deep loyalty towards the village and disapproved of any doings that would harm the inhabitants. Also Sakura felt that she could have perhaps stated Sasuke's quest for Orochimaru's power in a better manner.

Sakura rested her mug back down on the table, "As for when it's over..."

"Mmm-hmmm?" her mother narrowed her eyes, realizing that Sakura was going to tell her something that she would most likely be unhappy to hear.

"It won't be over when he gets released from hospital," Sakura said with a sigh, then added a meek finish, "Part of the rehabilitation is getting him used to his domestic surroundings."

"Be a little more specific, Sakura," the tone was impatient and curt, "What do you mean by getting him used to his domestic surroundings?"

"Well..." Sakura started uneasily, knowing that her mother's reaction, whatever it would be, would not be nearly as bad as her father's, who protected his daughter to an extreme. Any boy who spoke to Sakura would be immediately interpreted as trying to seduce his little girl, and would be scared off in an instant. Naruto was an exception, given that her father had seen her bash Naruto over the head for doing something stupid. But Lee, on the other hand, had seen the less pleasant side of her father.

"Well what?" her mother raised an eyebrow at her daughter's hesitation.

"You're not going to like this," Sakura replied in a way that gave the impression that she had swallowed some disgusting medicine, "But it means that I am going to be moving in with him for a while."

"What?" her mother asked crossly, "I won't hear of it!"

"It's only for a while, Mom!" Sakura exclaimed, immediately on the defensive, "Sasuke is so independent that I'm sure he'll ask me to leave a few weeks after he moves back into his home."

"He'll be the one who dismisses you?" her mother had crossed her arms in a stubborn manner that Sakura had picked up in habit, "What if you're wrong, Sakura? What if he does return your feelings? What if he doesn't want you to leave?"

Sakura let out a bitter laugh at the mere notion, "Are you kidding me? This is Uchiha Sasuke, someone who hasn't let a single person care about him since his entire clan was slaughtered. I'll be fine, really."

Her mother opened her mouth to argue further, but instead grabbed her mug of hot chocolate and took a few gulps, something Sakura knew she did to prevent herself from saying something she would regret.

"I don't know, Sakura," her mother said after she had put her mug back down, "People who isolate themselves from others are usually the loneliest."

"Then my staying with him should do him good," she glowered at her mother from across the table, her mother returning a similar-featured glower, "I'm doing this for the good of Konoha."

"I fail to see how this can help Konoha," her mother countered.

"Sasuke has lost everything... *everything* ," Sakura emphasized, "From his family to his bloodline ability, he even lost a major source of power for him. He has nothing left to lose, and he cannot hope to possibly seek the aid of those he once associated with—they would kill him. He can help us, but only if we help him—help him and trust him. I trust him, Mom, and I'm going to move in with him after he's been released from hospital. I am no longer seeking your approval, I am doing it regardless of what you—or Dad—think."

Her mother sighed wearily and held her temples in her hands, "I wish you weren't as stubborn as your father."

Sakura brought her nearly empty mug to her lips to hide the triumphant grin she wore on her face; Inner Sakura was doing a wild victory dance within her head.

"Do you know even know where he lives?" her mother asked, and Sakura nodded, "What condition is residence in? I will not have my

daughter living in filth."

"Cleaned it out four days ago," Sakura replied, finishing the last of her mug of hot chocolate, "It's livable, and clean, but the yard needs some major work."

"I see," her mother still did not approve, "Accommodations? Where were you planning on sleeping?"

"Well, I have to be available at all times, seeing as there will no longer be nurses from the hospital tending to him at night," Sakura replied evenly, "There is a futon and extra bedding, I was going to set it up in the corner of his room."

Her mother groaned wearily, "Your father is *not* going to be happy about this at all."

"Probably not," Sakura stated matter-of-factly, glad that she was not the one who was going to be breaking the news to him.

Standing up, Sakura put her mug by the sink and stretched, "I'm going to bed, my chakra is low and I'm feeling tired."

"Try to wake up early tomorrow morning, your father is coming home from a mission late tonight and I want you to see him before he leaves for second half," her mother told her before her daughter left the kitchen.

"Okay," Sakura replied, smiling, "Thanks for letting me do this, Mom."

Her mother waved her off, letting Sakura know that it was the last thing she wanted to let her daughter do, but did not have the time, energy, or willpower to argue. Climbing up the stairs to her bedroom, Sakura found the cheerful feeling returning to her, and the lullaby, which Uchiha Mikoto had written for Sasuke, was playing quietly in her head.

It was in the middle of the night that Sakura woke up. She blinked groggily awake and rolled onto her side, peering at her alarm clock. It read ' 1:38 ' and Sakura pulled the blanket over her head, wondering what had caused her to stir. Listening carefully she could hear to voices shouting from somewhere downstairs.

"This is no longer on the table for arguing," her mother's clear voice hollered, "I am not asking you what we should do; she is going to take care of this boy, and that's final! And she will do it with my full support, regardless of what you think!"

A small thankful smile crossed Sakura's face, recognizing the similarity between the words she had spoken to her mother and the words her mother spoke to her father. And with the comforting thought that she could continue unopposed—and ignoring the continued shouts from downstairs—she closed her eyes and fell back to sleep.

A/N: Extra long chapter this time round! Thirteen pages :o

Ino and Sakura's friendship remind me of me and my sister's relationship. We'll insult each other and condescend one another, making fun of the other's mistakes, but we never mean it cruelly, and it's always just a joke. My own parents are appalled by the names we call each other, and the way we whap the other over the head, but I guess they just don't know us well enough. I consider my sister, in many ways, another one of my best friends. Kinda like Sakura thinks of Ino as her best friend :3

Please review!

Drieldwin

Chapter 10

A/N: Chapter ten...I was originally going to have the first part in the last chapter, but it just didn't seem to fit with it. I like ending my chapters mid-dayish or at the end of a day. It's been ten chapters and Sasuke is still in hospital x.x I'm wondering how long this story is going to end up, cause there's still the part with Sakura moving in with him, and we can't leave his desire for revenge go unnoticed. Only time will tell :p

Anyways, moving right along.

Chapter Ten: Confrontation and Homecoming

"Nani?" Naruto looked up at Sakura in an inquisitive manner, ramen noodles hanging from his mouth in a gauche manner, "Sasuke wants to see *me* ?"

Crossing her arms impatiently, the petal haired girl sighed in annoyance, "Yes, Naruto, Sasuke wants to see *you* ."

Bewildered, Naruto stood up from the counter at the ramen shop, slurping up the noodles as he did so, leaving the half-finished bowl behind. It sure was easy to find Naruto, Sakura noted inwardly, he was practically living at Ichiraku's; when on earth did he go training?

"Come on," Sakura stated impatiently, taking out a small wallet and even paying for her teammate's ramen, "Let's not keep him waiting!"

"Wait!" Naruto exclaimed suddenly, and Sakura rolled her eyes impatiently, turning to face him.

"What is it, Naruto?" she sighed irritably, if this took too long, then the healing procedure would be pushed back too far into the day and

the whole schedule would be thrown out of whack.

It did not help that she was in a particularly grouchy mood at the moment, having just left her house. She had, as her mother instructed, woken up early to see her father off on the second part of his mission, and needless to say he had gotten into a stern talking-to with her. Having been used to arguing with her father for years, she knew that no matter what he told her to do, she was not going to listen to him, and he knew that no matter what he did, he could have no influence over her. It was a wonder why they even argued sometimes, knowing that the result would not be any different—her mother claimed that it was a kind of sport between them. But despite arguing being a sport, it still left her grouchy with her father for being so...unreasonable!

"There's something that I need to get for Sasuke," he said jumping up, not even thanking her for paying for his meal, "It'll only take a moment, Sakura-chan. I just need to stop by my house for a moment."

"Only for a moment?" she questioned doubtfully.

"Hai!" Naruto exclaimed, "Dattebayo!"

"Fine, fine, I'll wait for you here," she said with a resigning sigh, "Just hurry."

Without even giving her a response, Naruto leapt off down the road with such speed that one would have thought he was an orange splash of paint that flickered on a shop wall for only an instant.

"I can't believe Sasuke would wait this long to see me! It's not like him to be scared or anything—unless he's heard how strong I've gotten and he knows what's coming to him—"

The doors of the elevator closed and Sakura swiped her card-key through the slot while listening to Naruto ramble. He had been

talking for the last little bit, complaining about Sasuke and how he should have been seen earlier. All things considered, Sakura was glad that Naruto hadn't managed to pass her the other day. He seemed to have forgotten all mention of Sasuke's injuries and was blathering on about Sasuke's condition like he had only received a scratch from a genin-level mission.

"Naruto," Sakura said after a moment, cutting her friend's digression short, "There's something you need to know...about Sasuke that is."

Turning his head towards her, he studied her curiously with his blue eyes, clearly concerned by the downheartedness that had suddenly appeared on her face.

"Yesterday I wouldn't tell you what was wrong with Sasuke," she started, not knowing how to form her words, "Well, I talked to him, and he requested to see you—but he wants you to know what happened to him before you see him.... I have permission now, from my patient, to reveal his condition—it was actually a request...and I think it was very difficult for him to ask me to tell you..."

Naruto stared at her for a moment, still looking confused by her solemn manner, "What is it, Sakura-chan?"

"Sasuke is blind," she stated after a moment, "When you walk into that room, it will become apparent immediately."

"Blind? As in—" Naruto started off hesitantly, seeming to find the news almost incomprehensible.

"As in he can't see; his vision is gone, he'll probably never look upon anything again," she stated so bluntly that Naruto was silent with shock for a while.

She thought she had gotten over Sasuke's situation, that it didn't matter anymore, that the only thing she could do was help him; her heart told her otherwise and sympathy towards Sasuke seemed to tear her spirit in two. Fists clenching slightly in frustration, Sakura

cursed herself again and again—maybe if she had stopped him from leaving Konoha, maybe if she could have helped him then...

"Please, Naruto," she whispered quietly, "You know Sasuke as well as I do, and you know that he's probably a bit touchy on his current state. Please act normal, and don't be sorry for him, because I know that will only make him angry and hate the position he's in. I don't want that..."

Naruto turned his head and looked at the floor, his face grim; his hand was resting against the pocket of his orange jumpsuit, where the gift for Sasuke was being carefully kept. Neither of them said anything more as the door to the elevator opened on the fifth floor. Stepping out, Sakura led Naruto the short distance to Sasuke's room, stopping in front of the door. Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, she forced her sorrow to dissipate—it was a lack of self-control on her part, and she firmly reminded herself that tears and sadness would not help Sasuke.

Opening the door she walked in, a smile on her face though she probably needn't have bothered. Sasuke's bed was tilted up a little, so he was in a reclined sitting position when they entered. The rays of the fading sunrise were shining down on him, somewhat silhouetting his form against the window. The bandage around his head was clean, and he had already been showered and garbed in his clothes, the Uchiha emblem partially visible.

"Ohayo, Sasuke," Sakura said in a semi-cheerful tone. She supposed she could have done better, but then it was a mix between cheerful and her regular voice, so she supposed she sounded more serene than anything. As long as she didn't sound depressed, that was fine.

"Sakura," he acknowledged evenly, then after a short pause, "Good morning...dobe."

Beside her, Sakura saw Naruto smile weakly, a saddened look on his face, but she knew him well enough to know that he would not do

anything stupid.

"Oi, teme," he replied lightly, with an undertone of empathy, "It's been a while. I owe you some pain, you know?"

Sasuke smirked faintly, "I owe you some too, dobe, opening your mouth. Is there anyone left in Konoha who doesn't know I'm here?"

Naruto snorted good-naturedly, "Oi, oi, you caused a bigger fuss when you *left* ."

"Only because you made such a big deal out of it," Sasuke retorted, a crooked grin on his face.

"I promised Sakura-chan here that I'd bring you back," Naruto stated dutifully, the tension seeming to slowly fade away, "You have some nerve to let someone else do the job for me."

Sasuke snorted in answer to this, "I wouldn't have let *you* drag me back anyway."

Naruto let out a noise of protest. "Grrr! I'm stronger than you think, teme, and if I had known where you were I would have come down and had you out cold in a few seconds!"

Sakura smiled as the bickering began. It was like it had been before—like it had been when they were genin. The constant rivalry between the two of them, both acting like stubborn children, neither willing to give in to the other, and determined to outdo what the other did. It was supposed to be this way—this was how it should be: Naruto and Sasuke squabbling, while she stood off to the side, shaking her head at them, merely smiling at their childish behavior.

The fight seemed to have been brought to a stalemate. Naruto was glaring fiercely at Sasuke and Sasuke's expression clearly showed that he was doing the equivalent of glaring back. She crossed her arms, knowing that this was the point where she would step in and tell them to stop being such idiots.

"Alright you two, calm down," she smiled, cutting into the tension between them, "Honestly, you haven't come in contact with one another for years and the first thing you do is fight?"

"He started it," Naruto pouted, looking away from her in a sulky manner.

Sasuke tilted his head vaguely upwards, and Sakura suspected he was rolling his eyes.

"Oi, teme," Naruto piped in suddenly, "I almost forgot. I brought you something."

From within his pocket, Naruto drew forth the gift that he had brought for Sasuke. Having not seen it before, Sakura watched curiously as he unwound an old cloth from around it. In his hand, he held the Konoha forehead protector—the one that Sasuke used to own—the one that the scratch across it, almost crossing the leaf through the center.

Sasuke held out his hand expectantly as Naruto approached the bedside. He put the forehead protector in his old teammate's hand and took a step away as Sasuke turned it over in his palms. He was quiet for a minute, running the cloth through his hands, brushing his fingers over the metal. Slowly his fingertips traced the symbol of the leaf emblazoned into it, passing his thumb slowly along the crude scratch mark. Even though he said nothing, Sakura knew that he was moved, despite his emotionless expression refused to show it. She smiled contentedly.

"You better get used to wearing it, ah teme?" Naruto grinned, putting his arms behind his head lazily, grinning broadly, "Cause if you're going to get stronger again, you're going to have to train. And you'll need it when you train, especially against me—after all, I managed to put a scratch on it."

A smirk crossed Sasuke's face and he took the ends of the fabric, raising the protector to his forehead. He tied it firmly behind his head,

and smirked in the direction of Naruto's voice.

"You won't have as easy a time of putting another one on," he answered back, a defiant tone in his voice, "Even if three years have passed, a dobe is still a dobe."

A flame seemed to erupt in Naruto's eyes and he struck an overdramatic confronting pose, the arguing rekindled, "We'll see about that, teme!"

Before either of them could get another word out, there was a knock at the door; Sakura and Naruto both turned as the door opened; Sasuke merely sat and listened. A nurse poked her head in the door and looked at the trio, raising an eyebrow slightly at Naruto's theatrical stance. She quickly turned her attention to Sakura.

"Haruno Sakura?" she asked, and Sakura nodded in reply, "Maeko, the receptionist, wanted me to let you know that the girl from yesterday has just arrived."

Sakura straightened up and nodded firmly, "Thank you."

The nurse gave a respectful bow and after casting another questioning glance at Naruto, closed the door behind her. Sakura turned to face the two guys in the room, crossing her arms sternly.

"There is something I have to take care of," she spoke strictly, "I have to go for now, but I'll leave you two here. I should be back soon, I hope—in the meantime, try not to kill each other while I'm gone."

She gave an amused smile before turning towards the door, and opening it. She briskly headed towards the stairs, wanting to make it to her destination before Ino did. Inner Sakura pulled up the list of possible comebacks to use against her upcoming run-in with her ex-best friend, and smiled at the irony. She had asked Naruto and Sasuke not to kill each other while she was gone; it would be hypocritical if she and Ino ended up tearing each other's hair out.

And with that thought in her mind, she opened the door to the second floor.

Ino thought that it was very strange that when she returned to the hospital the receptionist had asked her how she was doing, wondering if she was feeling better. Not that it was particularly strange, but when she had told the woman her completely unbelievable story of seeing her ill grandfather, she hadn't even hesitated in letting her in. She hadn't expected that story to work—seeing as her grandfather had been dead for years now, and there was probably nobody in the hospital fitting the description of a sickly old man.

But nonetheless, her plan had worked, and now she was inside the hospital. Riding up the elevator, she smirked. It was very early in the morning, and it was unlikely that Sakura had arrived yet to treat Sasuke, or whatever she did when she was with him. Her imagination gave her unpleasant mental images of a certain pink-haired kunoichi cuddling up to a reluctant Sasuke. A frown darkened Ino's brow as she impatiently waited for the elevator doors to open; she was definitely going to confront Sasuke about the relationship between him and Sakura—as medical ninja, it was illegal to have relationship with a patient that was beyond professional, and she was going to make sure the Sakura had remembered that.

As the door opened, she strode briskly out of the elevator, pausing only to look at the plaque on the wall showing which range of rooms lay in which direction. Having found that the room two hundred and twenty-one lay down the left hallway and around the corner, she set out at a determined pass, glancing at the room doors as she passed until she came to Sasuke's room. She put her hand on the door handle and opened it gently, not wanting to wake Sasuke if he was asleep. She crept into the room and peered around the door—much to her surprise, it wasn't Sasuke he was in the room, but Sakura.

"Hello...Ino," Sakura said placidly, sitting on the edge of the bed, her hands folded neatly in her lap.

"Sakura- *senpai* ," Ino replied with a small sneer, putting the emphasis on the suffix. During medical training, Ino had to call Sakura her senpai because she was a good few months behind Sakura in the program. She had always hated to acknowledge that Sakura was ahead of her, and she had always spoken it with a spiteful tone.

"Can I help you?" Sakura inquired sweetly, but there was a dangerous edge in her voice.

"Where's Sasuke?" Ino demanded, putting her hands on her hips, "And don't deny that he's here, because Naruto told me that he's your *patient* ."

"Oh, I wasn't going to deny it," Sakura stated matter-of-factly, "I'm just wondering since when it has been the concern of the pharmaceutical branch to who and what goes in and out of this hospital."

"This had nothing to do with the pharmacy," Ino snapped, "It is on own personal business."

"It is a secret that Sasuke is here," Sakura stated with forced patience, "Therefore it does not concern you."

"Oh, and it concerns Naruto?" Ino snapped back, her own patience thinning.

"Naruto found out through eavesdropping," Sakura responded, her eyes darkening, "But it is none of his concern either."

"Why is Sasuke your patient?" Ino found herself demanding, "Why you?"

"Tsunade-sama assigned me to the task," Sakura replied, "She trusted me with this and I am the only one who can take time off and help him."

"I don't believe you," Ino responded stubbornly, "I want to see Sasuke and ask him myself."

"He's resting at the moment and I won't have you disturbing him," Sakura stated, "What I'm curious is to know why you are so desperate to see him. The mind transfer jutsu? Very sneaky, Ino—underhanded even."

"I want to see him because I love him!" Ino declared passionately at Sakura, expecting an argument in return, but was surprised when the pink haired kunoichi let out a laugh.

"Love him? *You* ?" she snorted, glaring over at her.

"Yes, I love him!" Ino shouted indignately, "And what about you? Why are *you* the one who gets to take care of Sasuke? Why are *you* doing this?"

"I'm doing this because I have been assigned by the Hokage to do this," Sakura informed her coldly, "And I'm doing it because you're not the only one who cares about him, Ino."

"That's strictly forbidden!" Ino countered angrily.

"I am not in any sort of forbidden relationship with Sasuke!" Sakura hollered, jumping to her feet and glaring daggers at her, "You know the rules as well as I do, you know how Sasuke is—how *dare* you suggest there be anything between us!"

"Oh yeah? Well, if you really want to know why I'm really here, it's to hear it from him directly. I can just see you sitting up here, playing the seductress!" Ino yelled back in equal intensity.

"The seductress?! *Me*?! " Sakura screeched indignantly, "How dare you call *me* the seductress when you were the one who was *throwing* yourself at Shikamaru after Sasuke left!"

" *Throwing myself* ?!" Ino shrieked, "How *dare* you!"

"Face it, Ino, you are just professing your love like a little twelve-year-old girl," Sakura taunted, "You don't care about Sasuke—you don't love him. Why deny it? You've been crushing on Shikamaru for years now! Trying to get his attention constantly, dragging him all over the place! You don't love Sasuke, Ino—if you did, you would be trying to find out how you can help, not accusing me of 'playing the seductress'. If you want to see Sasuke, then you'll have to wait until he's released from hospital in a few days."

Sakura relaxed her stance and cast a last sharp look at Ino, "Don't forget that he's a criminal to this village, and will most likely be punished accordingly, no matter what either of us do."

With that final word, Sakura walked past her and out the door, leaving a shocked Ino behind; the argument had been abrupt and short. Not only that, but the argument had also left her thinking about something she had never notice before. Had...had she really been so clingy to Shikamaru? She hadn't even realized it...maybe she was just like that towards guys. No, that didn't make any sense either, because she wasn't like that to Chouji or any of the other guys she knew. She didn't want to contemplate the possibility that she actually liked someone other than her beloved Uchiha.

Sasuke was being released in a few days, huh? Well... She didn't want to admit it to herself, but she knew that any other attempts for her to see Sasuke would most likely be thwarted—damn, it was so not like her to give up. But there was nothing she could do, right? Well, there was something she could do...she could help.

Leaving the room quietly and closing the door behind her, Ino plodded down the hallway deep in thought, having been given plenty to think about.

"Glad to see you're both still alive," Sakura stated cheerfully as the door opened up.

"Aa," Sasuke found himself replying, a crooked smile crossing his face.

"Did you deal with the problem?" he heard Naruto ask Sakura conversationally, "What was up?"

"Just someone poking their nose where it doesn't belong," Sakura replied, sounding displeased about the matter, "Which reminds me—Sasuke, I'm assuming you don't want any of your old fangirls being allowed into to visit you."

"Preferably not," he stated, not wanting his old schoolmates squealing and swarming into his room. Old associates he could perhaps put up with, but fangirls was an absolute no.

"I thought so," Sakura replied, sounding firm, "Are you and Naruto done visiting? Because I'd like to get the healing procedure started soon."

"Okay," Naruto's voice was projected towards Sakura, then when he spoke again, his voice was turned to Sasuke, "Oi, teme. Get well soon—we have to train you up again."

A smirk crossed his face, "You better get ready, dobe—I won't go easy on you."

"Neither of you should get overconfident," Sakura cut in, her voice amused yet sighing, "You'll both be careless and end up back here."

Though none of them said it, they all knew that Sasuke couldn't even hope to defeat Naruto at the moment—and even though he knew that they didn't say anything because they were being considerate towards his condition, it made him angry. His entire life he had been the best of the class in skill, and now here he was, worse than Naruto. In all honesty, he respected Naruto, but it still left him feeling worse that for once he couldn't beat his old rival—his best friend.

"Thanks for coming, Naruto," Sakura said kindly as there were retracting footsteps heading across the room to the door, "You're going to have to let me know when you want to visit again though—this a restricted floor."

"Hai," Naruto said cheerfully, "Ja ne, Sakura, teme."

There was a quiet closing of the door and Sasuke knew that Naruto had left, leaving him and Sakura alone. Her quiet footfalls approached the bed, and the edge of the mattress sank somewhat under her weight. He felt her grab his left hand, passing her thumb over the back of it like she said she would do, and there was a light touch at his forehead; he assumed she was brushing her fingers over his forehead protector.

"It suits you, Sasuke," she said after a minute, "I'm glad you're back."

He wasn't so sure if *he* was though. Even though he had ended up in Konoha, and he had found things going well, he wasn't certain if this was what was best. To retie the bonds that were severed—to recreate that which he knew he would have to destroy as he set out for Itachi.

"Sakura."

"Hm?" he felt her fingers fall away from his forehead.

"This was the last place I wanted to be when I woke up here; I hadn't planned on returning until Itachi was dead—and then I wasn't sure even then if I'd come back at all," he told her seriously, to let her know that he still firmly held that belief, "I didn't want ties with Konoha, and I still partially don't, but I don't really have a choice right now. Don't think that things can go back to the way they were. Even if I do stay, there will be those who will not accept me."

There was a pause from Sakura, and when she spoke, her words were gentle and sad, "You know, I think that really, deep down, you wanted to come back here—you were just afraid to. I can't say that I

know what you've been through, but I think that you're afraid to let anyone get close to you because you're afraid to lose everything again."

"I don't want to lose everything close to me," he stated coldly—again she was trying to understand him, "That's why I don't have anything close. It's easier that way."

"I think you're wrong, Sasuke," she replied quietly, "You really do have people you care about—even if you won't acknowledge it, or don't know it. Remember when you fought Naruto as you left for Orochimaru? He told me that you had been so intent on killing him, but you didn't. Even as he lay unconscious, you let him live. You could have killed him then Sasuke, but you didn't. He's your best friend, isn't he? Doesn't that count as a tie? Ties like that can't be broken, even if you try to; you're just basically ignoring them. You can't really break the bonds of friendship, especially when the person you are trying to sever them with won't let you."

A silence blanketed the room for a minute as he forced himself to deny the words she was speaking to him. They were true, he knew... He had left so that none of them would get hurt, yet Naruto and Sakura refused to give up on him, refused to leave him alone. He had told himself over and over that he was no longer connected with Konoha, and even helped plan the attack that Orochimaru was going to initiate on the small village to try and convince himself. But even if the ties could not be broken, he could still ignore them.

"And besides," she continued after the silence had been laid on a little too thickly, "Wouldn't you like to rebuild your clan here, in Konoha, where the Uchihas originated from? Why bother building it in a place far from here, with no historical value or meaning? You would be a group of Uchihas out in the middle of nowhere, no culture or history—just the Sharingan and a patriarch who betrayed his home."

She really did talk too much.

"Sakura—you're annoying."

He was sure she was smiling.

"Sorry," she said mildly, "Shall we start then?"

Instead of responding he reached up and untied the bandage that was wound around his head, then undid the forehead protector knowing that it was in the way of where she placed two of her fingers. Handing her the bandage he held onto the protector while she did whatever she did with the long strip of gauze fabric. His eyes were already open, and she did not need to request him to open them.

He didn't really pay any attention to her laying her fingers on his head, but focused on the Leaf Headband in his hands. The metal was warm from the heat that had been released from his forehead, and it was slightly scuffed from use—he was surprised that Naruto even had it; it had been so long, yet the baka had kept it all this time. Running his thumb over the deep scratch that had been etched into it, he thought about the things Naruto had told him while Sakura had been absent from the room.

Sakura had taken his leaving the hardest, Naruto had told him; everyday she waited, hoped and prayed that he would somehow come back, or that someone would find him. Her spirit had been broken for the longest time, though she refused to let it show. She eventually became Tsunade's apprentice, in hopes of being more useful, having developed an inferiority complex, causing her to think that she had been absolutely useless. Having a goal to achieve, she worked harder as a medical ninja than any other had, Naruto recounted to him, complaining that he had hardly seen her between missions because of her determination.

Of all the villagers, only Sakura never gave up hope on him, she had always trained her hardest as a medical ninja so that she could perhaps one day aid him and return him to the village.

She told me once that she wanted to find a way to extract Orochimaru's soul from your body. She was that determined to save you, teme—but you never acknowledged her back then, you always pushed her away. You didn't deserve her devotion, and don't make me think that you don't deserve it still.

Yet now, as Sakura sat before him, healing his eyes, he could not detect, or recall, any indications that emphasized that she had been missing him for so long. She had worked tirelessly over him, true, but would she have done it if she had not been assigned to the task? She still cared for him, but she did not seem so fanatical as she had been before, and while it was obvious that time had changed her, he couldn't help wondering if she held a touch of resentment towards him for leaving her behind.

As the chakra flowed from Sakura's fingers again, his thoughts once again became detached, a slight guilty feeling seeping into him as he thought of the how he had left her—a feeling he hadn't felt before, a feeling he had refused to feel. He tried to clear his head, but found himself unable to, as images of a smiling Sakura kept floating across his mind. The chakra flow was gentle and soft, he noted dimly—like Sakura's personality, he added. Sasuke blinked his eyes, trying to brush the thought away, but again he felt the urge to rest his hands against hers.

He clenched his fist into the fabric of his shorts, forcing his mind awake, letting the forehead protector dig into the palm of his other hand; he was not going to let himself do anything stupid. He stiffened up a little, but did not move enough to let Sakura notice his change in position, trying instead to think of how he was going to train in order to defeat Itachi, and what he would do afterwards. That last thought caused him to think of what Sakura had said—restoring a clan in an unfamiliar place, no culture, no history, only the Sharingan...and a patriarch who betrayed his village.

"Sakura," he said after a moment, still holding the Konoha forehead protector, "I have decided that I will stay in the village."

He didn't know how, but he could always seem to tell when she was smiling at him, "Welcome home."

A/N: A shorter one than the last couple ones, but it seemed like a good place to end it. Sorry :/

Terminology:

Teme: Pronoun in the form of 'you' that connotes to the position of a hand-servant; considered rude.

Baka: Idiot.

Hai: Yes. (I think this one is fairly well known, but... :p)

Ja ne: See you later. Or something along those lines.

Chapter 11

A/N: Blargh, stupid document uploader! Made my update be delayed by a whole week! (shakes fist) Sorry about the delay, and thanks for being patient.

Okay, one of the reviewers kindly corrected me in my misinterpretation of the word 'teme', which I did my best to define in the last chapter. I used their definition because it explained it very well:

"Teme" is a pronoun. It is not a noun, nor a suffix. It's a form of the pronoun "you". It is not a suffix, like "-kun" or "-chan". Neither does it mean "bastard." That definition was put in by translators and fansubbers, because when Naruto yelled out simply, "Sasuke, teme!" they thought just translating it "Sasuke, you!" did not fully show the inherent rudeness in Naruto's speech towards Sasuke, even though that is what is literally said. The origin of "teme" comes from "temae", which literally is "in front of my hand", connoting that whomever it is addressed to is in the position of a lowly hand-servant.

Sorry for the mix-up everyone! As you can probably tell, I don't speak Japanese. On another completely different—not to mention entirely random—note, has anyone noticed Anko's scarily similar appearance to Sheena from Tales of Symphonia? Scary thing is that they're both ninja from hidden villages that everyone knows about.

Chapter Eleven: Those Who are Cursed

"What news, Anko?" Tsunade asked calmly, her fingertips touched together and her elbows resting on her desk, "Have you heard from Jiraiya?"

It had been two months since she had sent out Mitarashi Anko to check on the Sannin, and finally, after what had seemed like forever, the capable ninja had returned unscathed, hopefully bringing news from her old teammate.

"I have," Anko replied in a serious tone, "And it doesn't look pretty."

"Oh?" Tsunade peered perceptively at the young woman, "What has happened?"

"It seems that the Akatsuki are moving, having locked onto another Bijuu—much like the nine-tailed fox within Naruto, and the raccoon demon, Shukaku, that resides within the Sand Village's Kazekage, Gaara," Anko reported, a grim expression on her face, "It is unsure of which demon it is, or who is the current Jinchuuriki—however there are speculations made by Jiraiya-sama and myself that they may be going for Raijuu, the six-tailed weasel."

Tsunade swiveled slightly in her chair, turning to face an overcast and gloomy sky outside the window. A mocking smile on her lips, "Wouldn't it be ironic if the power of that demon was bestowed upon Itachi?"

There was a low rumble as lightning flickered in the distance out over the horizon. It had been a gloomy day all day and things just weren't getting better. It had been sunny all week, but the weather seemed to have decided to turn nasty, along with current events. Things had gotten considerably worse with the news that Anko had just brought from Jiraiya, who was currently making secretive investigations into the activities on the Akatsuki. She sighed heavily and turned back to Anko, who was standing with one hand on her hip, looking troubled.

"Did Jiraiya say anything else?" she asked heavily, fearing more bad news may have come in tow.

"Other than that I had a 'splendid figure' and I should really consider wearing some tighter clothing that doesn't quite constrict my

movements with excess fabric—no," Anko recounted, a displeased smirk on her lips.

"I hope you hit him," Tsunade smiled from behind her laced fingers.

Anko's smirk broadened, "Oh, I did."

"Good," Tsunade replied approvingly, sitting up straighter, "Next time you see him—hit him over the head for me. You're dismissed."

"Will do," Anko grinned brightly and turned to leave, thoughts of some of Konoha's dumplings floating into her mind.

"Oh, Anko," Tsunade interrupted the woman's thoughts of delicious food, "One more thing. Do you remember three and a half years ago when that boy, Uchiha Sasuke, was given a curse mark by Orochimaru?"

Anko turned and looked at Tsunade curiously, "Yeah, what about it?"

"Well, he was found a week ago by a group on a mission and has been brought back to the village under complicated circumstances," Tsunade said leaning back in her chair, "I was hoping that maybe you could talk to him."

"Uh-oh," Anko frowned slightly, "Is he causing trouble?"

"No, no," Tsunade replied off-handedly, "I bound the curse on a permanent level—so he's safe... He's actually to be released from hospital tomorrow morning. However I was hoping you could talk to him about the curse mark before then—a kind of counseling session if you will. I think he relied on its power a fair bit and losing it was hard for him—can you try and point out to him how this is a turn for the better?"

"Sure thing, Hokage-sama," Anko grinned, "I'll go see him."

"I don't know if this will affect how things go, but apparently he blinded himself in order to escape the fate of being Orochimaru's

next vessel," Tsunade added, rubbing her temples slowly with her slender fingertips, "And his caregiver—Haruno Sakura—is not to know that he took his own sight."

"Pep talk, self-blinding, don't tell the caregiver," Anko repeated, counting them off on her fingers, "Got it."

"Can I ask you something before you go?" Tsunade asked just before Anko opened the door, "Why didn't you want your own curse mark to be permanently sealed?"

Pausing for a moment, Anko thought about her reply before giving a small smile to the Hokage, "Having to keep it under control reminds me not to make the same mistakes, and helps me remember where my loyalties should lie."

Before the Tsunade could say another word, Anko had left from the room, heading for her favourite dumpling stand, but her mind was pondering with curiosity a young Uchiha heir.

"What a dreadful looking day," Sakura commented, leading Sasuke gently by the arm through the hospital's garden, looking up at the sky with a frown.

It had been three days since Naruto had come to visit and Ino had attempted to intrude, but on the whole, things had been regular and routine. A couple of ANBU agents had been in to further question Sasuke, and come up with no more answers than Kakashi had derived from him. Other than that, there had been no major disruptions.

Word had quickly spread throughout their old classmates of Sasuke's condition, thanks to Naruto, and there had been a few visitors. Lee, Neji and Ten Ten had come to visit, and Shikamaru's group had come as well; Sakura was glad that Ino had behaved in a more mature manner—but perhaps it was because Shikamaru had been present. Naruto had been in several times, having twice

dragged in a blushing Hinata. Even Kiba towed along on one of Hinata's abductions—Shino only came in once for all of thirty seconds to wish Sasuke well before leaving, but considering it was Shino, it was amazing he showed up at all.

Treatment had been going well and Sasuke's eyes were almost completely healed from the damage that had been inflicted upon them. Sakura had happily announced to Tsunade that after tomorrow's healing session, Sasuke should be able to be released from hospital. Sakura was planning on telling her mother the news that evening, and start packing her things so that she could move in with Sasuke. And on top of that, her brother was supposed to be coming home from a mission anytime now and could help her move her things.

"The air smells damp," Sasuke stated, "Does it look like it will rain?"

"Yeah," she replied frowning, "If we're lucky, we won't get rained on before our walk is over. Do you want to head in now?"

"No," Sasuke replied, walking beside her at an even pace, "Unless you'd much rather go inside than risk getting wet."

"It's only water," Sakura said shrugging, "But my bet is that it'll come down in torrents once it gets going. The sky is dark with huge clouds—despite the air being comfortably cool, it looks like it'll get really cold if it rains. The wind's caught the clouds up there and they're moving pretty quickly over us, bringing some even more sinister-looking clouds our direction. I think in the distance there's lightning, but it might be a while before it reaches us."

"A mediocre description, but that doesn't tell me whether you want to go in or not," he replied, the corner of his mouth twitching slightly in amusement.

"Alright then," Sakura replied, "No, I do not want to go in quite yet."

"Fair enough," Sasuke responded evenly, "Tell me about the garden."

"Um, well, the path we're taking right now is the right fork that you stumbled on a couple days back—"

"Don't talk about that," Sasuke growled, and Sakura peered up at him inquisitively, then smiled softly. The back of Sasuke's neck was slightly red—something she had discovered always happened when he was embarrassed.

"Sorry," she smirked, trying to keep the amusement out of her voice, "Anyways, we're on the right fork, which is even paved. On either side of us are neatly trimmed bushes—I don't know what they're called but they have some pretty pink flowers blooming on them right now. On the other side of the bushes there are stepped flowerbeds, hosting some native plants, and foreign ones. We just passed a whole bed of crocuses, which cover the bed like a carpet—they're blossoming deep purples, the purest whites and the brightest of yellows.

"On the other side is a Japanese maple, the leaves are that lovely shade of red right now, the colour of—" Sakura paused, peering at the tree, not wanting to use the word 'blood', "—red wine. Planted around it are mismatched shrubbery, and some creeping plants to cover the remaining earth.

"Ahead of us the path stretches out into a sort of grove, where a number of different trees are. They were blooming last week—you just missed them. It's kind of too bad, it was really pretty, and I wish I could describe it for you."

"Go ahead," Sasuke prompted, "You remember what it looks like."

"Well, they're crab-apple trees, and in the springtime they bloom a lovely white. The leaves are a kind of reddish colour so it looks really nice with the blossoms. The flowers are so thick on the trees that it looks like they don't have any leaves, just the flowers—and the smell

is nice too, but I can't think of any anyway to describe that," Sakura recounted, walking down the garden path, her eyes focused on the clouds above, which looked like they were threatening to start spitting down any moment, "We should come back here next year so that you can smell them, it's really something."

"Sakura," Sasuke said, stopping turning his head slightly towards her, "It's starting to rain."

Sakura looked over at Sasuke and then turned her attention back to the sky, "Really? How can you—"

Sakura was cut short as a particularly large raindrop landed on her nose.

"I could hear it," Sasuke answered, not noticing Sakura's abrupt halt in speech as she rubbed the wetness from her face, "It's falling in places around us."

"I hadn't even noticed," she mumbled absently in reply then looked around at their surroundings.

Ahead of them the path stretched down the hill, and at the bottom she could see a bench. The bench in question had a little roof built over it to keep it shaded for patients who were resting there on sunny days, but the roof would also suffice for keeping them dry. The raindrops were falling more frequently already, and Sakura knew they would be soaked if they tried to turn back to the hospital, but they would remain relatively dry if they were to hurry to the bench that she saw.

"There's a sheltered bench up ahead, we can sit the rain spell out there," Sakura suggested, tugging a little on Sasuke's stationary form, "We'll end up dryer than if we run back to the hospital."

Sasuke said nothing but began to walk again, and Sakura impatiently led him forwards, knowing that asking him to run or even jog would most likely cause him to trip. The heavy drops rained down

on her, falling more often, splashing her with the cold water, causing goosebumps to rise on her skin.

"Sakura, could we hurry?" Sasuke asked impatiently, "We're getting quite wet."

"Hai..." she responded uncertainly, quickening her pace, "Careful, the path is quite rough, don't trip."

"Hn," was the only noise he made in response, hiding any damage to his pride that he might have felt.

The rain was coming down really hard when they arrived at the bench, and both of them slumped down on the wood, their clothes rather damp. At least neither of them were soaked, Sakura noted as a bright flash of lightning shone in the distance, and a few seconds later, a low rumble of thunder rolled by.

"I guess now all that's left is to wait," Sakura said, reclining back onto the bench, a sigh in her voice, "You're not too cold, are you?"

"No," came Sasuke's blunt reply.

"That's good," Sakura smiled, shivering slightly herself. The cool air had felt nice before, and the dampness in the air had been refreshing, but now that she was wet, the air felt frigid and cold. Sasuke had dropped her arm when they sat down, so she hugged herself tightly, rubbing her bare arms to keep warm.

"You should have worn something warmer," Sasuke told her, and Sakura blinked slightly at his perceptiveness. Was he stating a fact, or did he know she was feeling cold?

"I brought an umbrella, but it's up in your room," Sakura replied, pinching her upper arms to bring the blood to them, "I didn't think it would start to rain while we were out here."

Without a word, Sasuke offered his arm to her, causing Sakura to look at him in confusion. When she did not grab onto it immediately, he gave a little emphasizing nudge with his elbow, and allowed her to take hold of it tentatively. Wrapping both of her arms around his, she hugged herself closer to him, letting the heat from his side cause her shivering to ebb. Silence plagued her as she was completely taken by surprise—the Sasuke that she knew would have never done such a thing...she hoped that she wasn't being too clingy.

"Be better prepared next time," he told her in a voice that strongly suggested that this was a one-time-only thing.

"Hai..." she said quietly, an unwilling blush creeping on her cheeks. She was glad that Sasuke was going to be released from the hospital tomorrow—then he would not longer be her patient, and things like this could not be held against her in any legal way. He was considered to be her patient as long as he was in hospital, and she knew that as soon as Ino found out, there would be some very strong disagreements over Sakura moving into the Uchiha manor.

"My, don't you two look cute—all cozy and close together like that," came a mischievous sounding voice.

Sakura immediately loosened her grasp on Sasuke's arm and looked around wildly for the source of the voice. Sasuke looked unperturbed, the back of his neck not the least bit red—apparently false accusations were nothing to be embarrassed about for him, Sakura noted with envy.

There was a laugh, and Sakura thought it must have been because of her own reaction to the earlier said statement. She spotted a form crouched in a nearby tree, peering down at them through the leaves, and Sakura thought she recognized the woman. What was her name...? Mitarashi Anko, that was it.

The form leapt down from the bough upon which she was perched and landed neatly under the roof of the small shelter, a playful grin on her young face, "Haruno Sakura? ...I thought so. I recognize you

now—you were the one who passed the chuunin exam with flying colours a couple years back. Remarkable performance."

Sakura found herself blushing, feeling honored, "Why thank you... Mitarashi Anko, right?"

"Yeah, that's me," Anko smiled, then with a teasing note in her voice, added, "I've been looking for the both of you all over! What are you both doing out here in the rain? Everyone else has gone back inside."

"We were kinda caught off guard," Sakura smiled sheepishly, "We didn't want to get soaked on the way back to the hospital."

"Well you two are pretty wet anyways," Anko noted with amusement, "Anyways, I've been sent here by the Hokage-sama to tell you that you have the afternoon off."

"What?" Sakura asked with confusion, and out of the corner of her eye she saw Sasuke frown.

"Tsunade-sama said that I was to talk with Sasuke for the rest of the afternoon. When we're finished I'll have someone send for you," she replied lightly and cheerfully, "So you have the afternoon off. Ta!"

The dark-haired ninja gave a little wave to Sakura, telling her to leave in such a cheerful manner that it was hard to call rude, and in such an abrupt manner that there was no margin for arguing. Dumbfounded and a little uncertain, Sakura slowly rose to her feet, her arm pulling away from Sasuke's, however Sasuke grabbed onto her hand preventing her from leaving.

"Sasuke?" she found herself saying uncertainly, looking back down at him.

"Don't stay out in the rain."

"Okay," she said as his hand dropped away from hers, wondering dimly why he even cared, "I'll be back later this afternoon."

"Have fun!" Anko said called cheerily after her, as she sprinted off through the rain, trying to stay as dry as she possibly could.

She managed to get inside the hospital without becoming entirely soaked, and she knew that she should go home and get a change of clothes—not to mention a coat and a change of clothes for Sasuke. Having thought of a number of things that she could do with the time off, she wasted no time in quickly grabbing her umbrella from Sasuke's room, picking up a cell phone from Maeko, and heading out into the rain again.

To avoid tempting illness, she hurried home as quickly as she could, shivering as she went, her teeth chattering a little. She missed the warmth of Sasuke's shoulder as she had leaned on him, holding onto his arm—again she found herself speculating over his behavior. It was certainly a nice thing for him to do, and she appreciated the gesture, but his motives were unclear; knowing Sasuke, one would have to be worried for his health if he didn't have a motive behind his actions. She decided to ask him about it, later, knowing that he would probably have a simple and basic reason for his manner.

Sakura opened the door to her home and quickly stepped inside, the rain pelting so hard on the pavement that water droplets sprayed back up and soaked her feet. After shaking out her umbrella she quickly closed the door and hung it on a coat hook mounted on the wall, and kicked off her footwear. She sighed and a long shiver ran over her.

"Who's there?" came a voice from within the house; Sakura smiled as she recognized it to be her brother's.

"Guess," she announced back inside, stepping up out of the entryway and into the main hall.

A head peeked out from the kitchen at her and then burst out laughing. Sakura's brother, having a five-year difference between them, was in his early twenties, and was a Jounin of notable skill—he had recently been considering applying for a position in ANBU. A good head taller than Sakura, he held a strong resemblance to their father; however he had inherited a gene similar to his mother's pink hair, and as a result he supported a head of platinum-white locks, which always appeared tousled and messy. Dark, royal blue eyes, complete with a distinctive jawline and high cheekbones, reflected on his father's traits while a gentle smile and kind temperament indicated his mother's.

"What happened to you?" he asked laughing at her drenched and limp-looking state, "You're soaked!"

She made a face at him, "Shut up, Kanaye. Why is it that the first thing you always do when you see me is make fun of me?"

He walked over and tousled her pink hair, delivering a playful punch with his other hand, "Because you're my baby sister, and that's how it's supposed to be. You're not much better either, Sakura. The first thing you say to me after I've been away for two months is to shut up."

"That's because you're my older brother and that's how it's supposed to be," she mimicked, sticking her tongue out at him, then laughed despite herself, "Listen to us—we sound like a couple of Academy students."

He smiled good-naturedly in return, "How've you been, Sakura?"

"Let me go change my clothes and I'll come back and fill you in on what's been going on," Sakura said, rolling her eyes, walking towards the stairs, "Put some hot water on for me—I feel like having some hot chocolate."

It wasn't long until Sakura returned back downstairs in the kitchen, garbed in some clean—and more importantly—dry clothing. Her hair

was still wet and if she had just finished attacking it with a brush, knowing that if she didn't do so, it would look dreadful when it finally dried off. Kanaye was leaning against the kitchen counter, leisurely eating a muffin that their mother, with her expert culinary skills, had baked, and when Sakura entered the kitchen, he gestured at the kettle sitting on the stovetop.

"Am I going crazy?" he asked her in a teasing tone as she crossed the kitchen, "I think I am currently having a hallucination, in which you are wearing something that isn't sleeveless."

It was true that she hadn't changed into another sleeveless dress, but was in fact wearing a red t-shirt with sleeves that reached mid-way down her upper arms, decorated by the simple white circle that was the emblem of the Haruno clan. Her evergreen hued shorts had been replaced with some loose black pants, and her toes were just peeking out from the rolled up pant-legs.

"You would have thought yourself more crazy if you had been here last week," she replied matter-of-factly, as she took the kettle off the burner, reaching for a clean mug, "I was wearing something other than red."

"So," Kanaye said after Sakura had finished pouring herself some hot water, "How's Naruto?"

"He's fine," Sakura replied, grabbing the tin of hot chocolate mix from off the counter, "Training hard as usual—except he's taking a break now, mostly so that he can see/hassle my patient."

Sakura's brother and Naruto had quickly founded a friendship after the first time they met, and much to Sakura's dismay, had both found a common interest in pestering the pink-haired kunoichi. It wasn't surprising that they got along well, both being outspoken and a tad mischievous. Both were somewhat over protective of her and Sakura supposed that as Naruto had matured (slightly) with time, he reminded her more and more of her brother. Needless to say, the

both of them would go for ramen whenever Kanaye was in town and catch up on news.

"Oh?" he raised an eyebrow at her, "Who's your patient?"

Sakura noted with satisfaction that the conversation was going where she wanted to. "Do you remember Uchiha Sasuke?" she asked, sitting down at the table, stirring her hot chocolate with a spoon.

"Random question, but yes," her brother replied, his brow darkening with a frown, "He was the bastard who cause you to fall into depression for two years."

"Don't talk that way about him," Sakura replied, her own face creasing with a frown, "Anyways, *he's* my patient."

Sakura saw her brother's eyebrows raise so high that they disappeared behind his messy, silvery-white bangs, "What?!"

"You heard me," Sakura replied, a smile on her face "He was found and brought back to the village. I've been assigned to take care of him—"

"You mean you volunteered," Kanaye interrupted.

Sakura ignored his comment, "—and rehabilitate him. He's been blinded and is still in hospital recovering, but assuming everything goes as planned, he should be going home tomorrow. Which brings me to why I need your help tomorrow."

"Help? You're thoughts are too loosely connected to follow, Sakura."

"Be quiet, I'm about to explain," she glowered at him before taking an experimental sip from her hot chocolate, "I am going to be his caretaker; even though he is going to be released from hospital, the treatment isn't over. I'm going to be by his side at all times, so we'll have to live together."

"What? He's moving in here?" Kanaye's eyebrows disappeared again.

"No..." Sakura said patiently, correcting him, "I'm moving in with him, and I'll need your help tomorrow moving my things to his place."

After a moment's pause Kanaye stuffed the rest of the muffin into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. "Isn't this guy a criminal? I thought I saw his name in the latest bingo book," he asked with this mouth full.

"There's a good chance that he's going to get a pardon," Sakura told him distractedly, the hot chocolate was evidently still too hot as she found herself nursing a burnt tongue.

"How long will you be living with him?" her brother inquired after a moment.

"Until he feels he can get by on his own," Sakura told him, "Don't freak out like mom did when she found out."

He snickered slightly, "I'm not going to freak out, but I can't say I approve. You still like this guy, right? ...I dunno, Sakura."

"Tsunade-sama trusts me with this," she replied defiantly, glaring at her brother from over the rim of her mug, "And regardless of how I feel, nothing inappropriate is going to happen. This is the second time that I've been reminded of the impropriety of the situation."

"Sorry," Kanaye shrugged in apology, crossing his arms lazily, "Tell me about Sasuke—what's he like?"

"I can tell you're still suspicious," Sakura stated haughtily, "So I'll put your mind at ease: Sasuke is a cold, prideful, and stubborn person who refuses help from anyone. He never allows anyone to get near to him if he can help it and has never particularly showed any signs that he's considered me more than a teammate and a friend—he says that I'm annoying. He protects people by *not* befriending them, to protect them from his brother who murdered the whole Uchiha

clan nine years ago. His sole ambition is to kill said brother and restore his clan to its former glory."

Kanaye was frozen with a laughable look on his dumbfounded face, "And you like this guy because...?"

Sakura laughed and smiled, "Because I know he's a good person at heart."

Kanaye merely tilted his head somewhat as he shrugged, clearly not understanding his sister at all. After a moment he looked over at her with a troubled look on his face, "I have issues with the 'restore his clan' part. He'll need help with that bit."

"Kanaye, I'm only *seventeen* —Sasuke is only *sixteen* ," she sighed, then subsequently glared at her brother, "Sure teenagers do stupid things, but he is the most level-headed, mature, and rational person I have ever known. And you *know* me—I'm not that kind of person."

"Okay, okay," Kayane put his hands up in surrender, "I believe you. I just got home and I don't want you mad at me. So what do you want me to do to help?"

"I'd hug you right now if I felt like getting up," Sakura smiled, "I'm going to pack my things this evening, I just need help toting them—his house is a little bit far from here. I'm going to see if I can get Naruto to help, so you can catch up with him tomorr—blargh!"

Sakura acked loudly as the hospital cell phone vibrated in her pocket, against her hipbone. A very strange sensation indeed, especially because it was always unexpected, and tickled terribly. Pulling out the phone she cracked it open, putting the receiver to her ear.

"Moshi moshi," she said absently while glaring at her brother who was laughing at her reaction.

"Sakura," came the voice of Maeko the receptionist from the hospital, "Uchiha Sasuke has come back with Anko."

"Oh, thank you for letting me know," Sakura replied into the mouthpiece, "Tell him that I'll be there in twenty minutes."

"Alright, I'll let him know," Maeko replied cheerfully, "See you soon."

"Bye," Sakura replied before hanging up. She looked over at Kanaye and slipped the phone back in her pocket, "I have to go now. Afternoon rehab."

"What? Already? You just got here," Kayane said frowning indignantly, "When are you going to come home?"

"Later this evening—eightish," Sakura replied before downing the rest of her hot chocolate.

"I'll walk you to the hospital," Kanaye told her, straightening up and running to grab their coats.

"Fine," Sakura grinned.

She and her brother had always been close, and he liked to spend time with her, saying he missed her when he was on missions. Sakura had told him that he probably just got bored on his missions because there was nobody to make fun of.

"I'm going to make a stop that's out of our way," Sakura added afterwards, remembering that Sasuke was probably still wet, and to spare him the horror of having to wear one of those hospital gowns, she would go pick up a dry set of clothes for him.

He nodded in reply and tossed her coat to her, where it caught her in the face. Not wanting to waste time arguing with him, she shrugged it on quickly.

"After you," Kanaye said, striking a mock-gentlemanly pose and opening the door.

Sakura rolled her eyes and grabbing her umbrella, she headed back out into the rain.

Sasuke listened to Sakura's receding footfalls until they faded away amid the pelting of the falling rain. The woman, Anko, paused for a moment longer as well, before coming and sitting down on Sasuke's right hand side; he said nothing.

"So, you're Uchiha Sasuke," Anko said happily and by the sound of her voice, she was facing forwards, speaking into the rain.

He nodded but did not say anything in return, his mind toying with the information that he had heard about Sakura becoming a chuunin.

"I don't know if you remember, but I'm Anko," the woman told him conversationally, "I was the one who oversaw the second part of the chuunin exam, in the Forest of Death."

"I remember," he said after a moment, recalling the sprightly young woman who introduced the rules of the exam to them. If his memory served correctly, she had had brown eyes and dark black hair that had a violet sheen when in the light. "Sakura passed the chuunin exam, then did she?"

"Yep, and what a spectacular performance it was—she should seriously consider going jounin, but she doesn't want to leave the hospital right now," he heard Anko say in dismay, "Too bad, we could really use someone like her on the field."

"Hn."

"Anyways, I came all the way out here because I figure I owe you an apology, because I'm the person who is somewhat responsible for getting you that curse mark on your neck," Sasuke noted that she sounded regretful.

"In what way were you responsible?" he asked suspiciously, his nearly healed eyes narrowing under the damp bandage.

"I used to be Orochimaru's student, and on that day, three and a half years ago, I should have realized it was him the moment that Rain Ninja returned my kunai," Anko replied, sounding grim, "If I had realized it then, perhaps you would have been spared all the trouble and pain you have been through."

"Student," Sasuke echoed, his tone flat, but his response was a question within a statement.

"Yeah...when I became a genin, I was put into a group with Orochimaru as our sensei. He was very different from anyone I had ever known, and powerful too. I admired him, looked up to him even," Anko stated bitterly, "I wanted to be just like him... But then he started with his experimentations, and I grew concerned. Even though he told me that he had permission to perform such experiments, I shouldn't have believed him like the fool I was. I trusted him."

Her voice died off quietly, and she was quiet for a while, Sasuke merely faced out into the rain, listening to it hit the ground with the splattering noise it emitted. He had no idea where this woman was going with this, or why she was even talking to him.

"Come here," she said suddenly, and Sasuke felt her grab his hand.

She took it and roughly laid it on her neck, where she held it in place. He frowned for a moment feeling her cool skin against his palm with confusion. Her skin was cold from the air, but then he felt it: a light pulsing of heat under his fingertips.

"Feel that?" she asked him, and he nodded mutely in reply. She let him drop his hand away and he rested it on his knee, "That's my curse mark."

Sasuke instinctively reached up and rested his hand on his own mark, the patch of skin warm, but not pulsing with life. He frowned slightly as he realized that this—Anko—her curse mark was still active.

"I think I was one of the first people he placed the mark on... I can't remember distinctly, but I think I was the only one of ten people, who had received the mark, that survived," she said with spite, venom dripping from her voice, "And he didn't tell me what he was going to do. I just remember collapsing on the floor in pain, lying for hours convulsing—I wanted to die, I wanted to know why this was happening, I wanted to know why Orochimaru was treating me like this. None of it made sense."

Sasuke recalled the time that he received his curse mark. The pain was unbelievable, and he could barely recall anything that was going on around him. He vaguely remembered Sakura...she had put her arms around him and held him close. He must have lost consciousness for he couldn't remember anything else after that... not until he sensed danger. The power had been pulsing over him, slowly drawing him to consciousness, and when he woke, he saw that Sakura had been beaten and bruised, lying collapsed on the ground. Not knowing why, and still not knowing even now, he had been absolutely enraged by her appearance. Who had done this to her? Who had hurt her? He had failed to protect her, and now he was going to make the attacker pay tenfold for what they had done to her.

"After I recovered, I was broken. The person I trusted most had betrayed me—I didn't know him like I thought I did," Anko said after a long silence, breaking into Sasuke's distant thoughts, "And when I began to show signs of uncertainty towards him, he had parts of my memory wiped and dumped me alone in the forest, alone and confused. It took ten years for me to remember what had happened during the time I helped him with the experiments...and sometimes I'm not sure if I'm glad I got them back."

"Are you saying it will be ten years before I am able to recall what was taken from my memory?" Sasuke asked her, turning his head sharply towards her.

"You may never get them back—I got mine back by chance when I was sent on a mission to the hideout of Orochimaru's lab," Anko said quietly, "And other than the fact that I had been found near the area, it was unknown that Orochimaru had had anything to do with that place."

"Why are you telling me these things?" Sasuke asked after a moment.

"Because I know that you left this village to seek power from him," Anko replied, "It was almost inevitable—the mark draws you to him if you use it. But I want you to know that you have no idea how lucky you are to be rid of that mark. The power that it had is not worth it—I lost almost everything because of Orochimaru, so don't you go losing the things that are close to you too."

Sakura's face drifted across Sasuke's subconscious as Anko spoke, but his conscious mind was pondering something else.

"Yet your curse mark is active," Sasuke pointed out, his voice not entirely an accusation, "Could you not get the Hokage to bind yours?"

Anko's voice was sad as she gave her reply, "It is my punishment for my foolishness. I will let this mark haunt me until the day I die."

Sasuke said nothing to this, as he thought of his own foolishness. He had intended to use the mark only once more, but that in itself was foolish, and it was probably for the better that he had gotten his curse sealed. But regardless, if anyone should have been burdened with the punishment of bearing the curse mark for the rest of their life, it should have been him. He should have been the one resisting its pull and wicked whispers—tempting him to use it, and suffering because of it.

"Hard is the life of those who are cursed," Anko said solemnly from his right.

"Aa," he replied quietly, the first time he put emotion into a one-syllable answer.

It was a hard life indeed.

A/N: A nice fat chapter for you this time, 15 pages :O And I know that I threw in an OC there, but he's likeable, and for those of you who hate original characters, he's only going to be mentioned infrequently. I like Kanaye—I always felt that Sakura needed a caring older brother. For those of you who watch/read Shaman King, SasuSaku relationships remind me sort of RenPirika, and I just seemed odd without an older brother like Horo Horo to be in the picture. SasuSaku's definitely the better relationship though :p

I also wanted Anko to be brought into the story somehow because a lot of people seem to forget that Sasuke isn't the only one who has a curse mark. Well, I'm sure they remember, but they just don't mention it, so it seems like he's the only one.

Chapter Twelve, here we come!

Drieldwin

Chapter 12

A/N: Thanks for all the reviews everyone! I know I thank you guys almost every chapter, but I do sincerely mean it. Your comments are greatly loved, and you ask excellent questions too! What has really amazed me is that it's only been recently that people have been requesting the return of Sasuke's sight. I'm sorry, but I still can't tell you what I've got planned, but I can guarantee, vision returning or not, a majority of you should be pleased with the ending. I'm still writing away and I've got the whole story planned out, and all major plot holes filled in or bypassed. Just thought I'd give you the heads up!

Chapter Twelve: Lectures

The sky was not stormy that day, but the remnants of the rainfall the previous day was evident as an overcast blanket of clouds stretched out over the village. It was warm enough, and while Sakura was still wearing a t-shirt instead of the sleeveless dress, it was relatively pleasant weather.

Sasuke had been released from hospital that very morning as she finished up with the healing procedure, and were now heading to the Uchiha manor, after stopping to her house to pick up the 'volunteers' who were helping by carrying her things.

"Thanks for doing this guys," she said over her shoulders to Kanaye, Naruto and Lee, "It would have taken me forever if I had done it by myself."

"No problem, Sakura-san," Lee piped cheerfully, toting most of the luggage himself.

"Yeah..." Kanaye grunted sarcastically, "No trouble—just a little back pain later on in life, but that's all right; I'll just be stooped over like an old man."

"Oh, quit your whining" Sakura made a face over her shoulder at the comment, "Lee-san isn't complaining, and *you're* the one who's trying for ANBU. Honestly, if you're this weak, I'm surprised you made it out of the Academy."

Sasuke, who had his arm linked with Sakura, gave crooked smile in amusement.

"Oi, Sakura-chan," Naruto groaned from behind them, Sakura giving him a frown, "Is there anything left at your house? It's almost seems like you're going to be moving in for good."

"Don't be silly, Naruto," she replied curtly, "For someone who wants to be the Hokage one day, you sure are making such a big fuss over something as small as hauling luggage."

"But it's so heavy!" Naruto complained loudly.

"Honestly, Naruto," Sakura rolled her eyes, "You're doing even worse than Kanaye."

Behind her she heard Naruto grumble something indistinctive. She shook her head slightly from side to side; for someone who was so eager to help, he sure did make a big deal out of it. Contrarily, Lee had been very helpful. He had been present when Sakura asked Naruto for help in moving her things, and had happily volunteered to assist them. He had also been a little more sympathetic towards her when she told the both of them the reason she needed her belongings moved.

Like her father, Naruto had exploded at the news of Sakura moving into Sasuke's house, and had made many vehement protests; naturally Sakura had not given him an inch, resulting in Naruto's defeat. But perhaps she should have told him that day, instead of the

previous night, because the next morning it seemed like everyone she knew had found out of the accommodation arrangements. Ino had stormed up to the fifth floor and burst into Sasuke's room, just before the healing procedure, absolutely livid. Quietly excusing the both of them, Sakura led Ino to the staffroom next door where an all-out shouting match had ensued. It had eventually gotten so bad that the doctors and nurses on break began to make bets on them. Those who had bet on Sakura walked away with their purses heavier.

But other than the mishaps with her father, Naruto, and Ino, everything had run smoothly. What made the day seem just that much more better was that Sasuke's eyes were completely healed, and it was almost refreshing to see him walking around with the bandage gone from his head. Sakura was glad to see his mesmerizing obsidian eyes visible to the world, even if the rest of the world was not visible to him.

She was leading Sasuke carefully down the road, amazed at how he was doing; not once had he stumbled on the rough pavement. Perhaps it was because he was being extra careful so that Naruto wouldn't laugh—though Sakura seriously doubted that Naruto would laugh if Sasuke lost his footing—or maybe he was just getting better at walking around. Nonetheless, she was proud of him.

"Augh," Kanaye groaned, "Sakura, if I had known that this much work would be required, I wouldn't have agreed."

"Same here," Naruto whined.

"Just think of it as training for D-rank missions, Naruto-kun!" Lee exclaimed optimistically.

"Hm," Naruto paused as he stopped to ponder the concept, "This is how you and your sensei train? Awesome! I won't lose to you Fuzzy Brows!"

"You'll probably collapse before we get there, dobe," Sasuke commented with a smirk, and Sakura laughed lightly.

"Too much ramen lately?" Kanaye teased, "Getting out of shape?"

"Speak for yourself," Sakura shot back as they rounded the corner into the Uchiha neighbourhood, "You and Naruto will probably be going out for ramen every night until your next mission. And quit complaining, we're almost there."

"Oi, Kanaye, Fuzzy Brows! I'll race you the rest of the way!" Naruto exclaimed suddenly, putting on a burst of speed and rushing ahead, "Winner gets treated to ramen!"

"You're on, Naruto!" Kanaye shouted quickening his pace as he ran after the fox-faced boy.

"I shall do my best!" Lee announced as he dashed after the other two ninja ahead of him.

"Don't drop anything!" Sakura hollered after them, then let out hearty sigh, "Sometimes I don't know what do make of them."

Sasuke said nothing to this, but instead changed the topic, "It sounds busy around here—louder than I remember."

"Oh, that's right; only half the neighbourhood was filled when you left," Sakura recalled in a thoughtful tone, "It's only recently that its been filled up again. People have put the disaster that took place here out of their minds and are no longer afraid."

"One day this neighbourhood will be filled with Uchihas again," Sasuke said firmly, "like it should be."

"I believe it," Sakura said confidently, "Regardless of who lives here now, it'll always be an Uchiha place."

"Aa."

They rounded the last corner and Sakura saw their three comrades resting at the foot of the front gate, all of them panting slightly from the race, their loads put in a pile on the ground. As she and Sasuke approached the trio, Sakura wondered if Sasuke could sense the stares that were shot in his direction. She knew that some people had known Sasuke to live here previously, and were most likely surprised to see him back after so long—and blind. Perhaps it was a good thing that his vision was gone, because then he was spared the merciless stares that were being cast at him as they walked by.

Coming up to the group, Sakura put her free hand on her hip, smiling lightly, "Who won?"

"Kanaye-kun won," Lee announced with adoration, "He is very quick indeed! I shall strive hard to be able to match his speed so that I may one day be worthy of a rematch!"

At this comment, Kanaye flexed his arms and gave Sakura ridiculous grin.

"Stop fooling around," Sakura stated making a face at him, "Why are you all lying about?"

"The gate's locked!" Naruto complained, "How do we get in?"

"How else?" Sakura stated impatiently.

"Jump," Sasuke stated evenly before Sakura could explain.

"Exactly!" Sakura agreed, "Lee-san, could you please take Kanaye's bags? Thank you. Kanaye, come take Sasuke's other arm."

"I don't—" Sasuke began grumpily, but Sakura cut him off.

"I don't want to have deal with a broken ankle, Sasuke," she said strictly, then after a moment dropped her arm from his, "Or you are welcome to try it yourself."

A growl came from the young Uchiha and he grabbed her arm again, reluctantly. Sakura nodded over at Kanaye who handed his sister's luggage to Lee before approaching Sasuke with caution. Grabbing hold of Sasuke's arm, Kanaye raised an eyebrow at the Uchiha's crabby temperament and gave Sakura a questioning look. She ignored the look and turned to the remaining two ninja.

"After you, Lee-san," she said cheerfully.

"Hai, Sakura-san," Lee struck the 'nice-guy' pose and leapt nimbly over the fence, followed shortly by Naruto.

"Alright, on the count of three," Sakura instructed, and she felt Sasuke cling a little tighter to her arm; dimly she found herself wondering if he was grasping Kanaye as hard, "One, two, three—jump!"

The three of them pushed off from the ground, leaping into the air. There was the brief feeling of flying over the gate, followed by the fleeting sensation of falling downwards before landing gracefully into the unkempt yard. Kanaye and Sakura hung onto Sasuke as he stumbled as his feet made contact with the ground. Once he was righted up, Kanaye released the young man and relieved Lee of the extra bags he was carrying.

"Wonderful," Sakura said cheerfully, "Now we just have to get around back."

Naruto stared at the overgrown side path, his eyes wide; Kanaye's eyebrows had disappeared behind his bangs. Lee was the only one who looked unperturbed, and even appeared eager at the challenge.

"Oh, come on, I've done it a dozen times already," Sakura said rolling her eyes, "Let's go, Sasuke. I'm sure we'll have a lot less difficult time than Naruto."

With a smirk, Sasuke allowed Sakura to walk him towards the thick mass of dense bushes and followed her wordlessly through the

jungle. She was careful to lift branches out of his way so that he would not run into them, and sometimes it meant that she had to hold her arm practically in front of him as he passed by a stubborn limb. A couple of times they were forced into some rather awkward and uncomfortable positions, but they were quick to move from these positions and moved on without mentioning them. After a few minutes, they made it through to the other side, and Sakura helped Sasuke up onto the veranda.

"Yeah, as you probably noticed, the yard needs a little work," she told him laughing and he gave an acknowledging 'hn'.

There were the sounds of struggling and groaning from where they had just come from, and turning her head, Sakura watched a very scathed-looking Naruto and Kanaye emerged from the side of the house. Lee came forward a few seconds later without a scratch on him.

"Great," she smiled at them, Inner Sakura laughing hysterically at her brother and her teammate, "Hang on a second while I pick the lock open."

"There's a key under the loose shingle on the corner of the roof," Sasuke said as she dropped his arm, preparing to grab the piece of wire she used to pick the lock.

"You're *joking* ," Sakura groaned putting her hand to her forehead, "That would have saved me so much time if I had known!"

He shrugged slightly at her as she clambered up the post at the corner of the veranda, feeling around for the key. After a few seconds, her fingers brushed something cold and metallic, and she retracted her hand, the key clutched in her triumphant fist.

The door came open easily and the lot of them piled into the house. Having spoken with Tsunade about the lack of power, Sakura was relieved to see that it had been turned back on when she flicked the

light switch. They all entered the house and walked down the hall a little ways, coming across the kitchen.

"After we get things put away, I'll make everyone some lunch," she told the group, then turned to the young man whose arms she was linked with, "Which room is yours Sasuke?"

"Go across the hall from here, into the living room, and on the left side of the room there's another hallway. It's the second room on the right," Sasuke answered without hesitation, having already talked to Sakura about sleeping arrangements.

"I thought as much," she replied nodding, then she turned to the group, "Can you please take my things there?"

"NANI?!" Naruto exclaimed loudly, and Sakura flinched away slightly—not because she was intimidated, but because she was afraid to be flecked with spit, "You're going to be sleeping in *his* room?!"

Kanaye crossed his arms across his chest, a frown darkening his handsome features, "Sakura..."

Even Lee looked like he disapproved. Sasuke merely shrugged and let go of Sakura, experimentally walking into the kitchen and sitting down on the floor when he came across the low table. Sakura glowered at his back as he put his chin in his palm; she was hoping that he would at least help her defend her case, but it looked to her like he wanted no part in the upcoming disagreement.

"Okay, I am only going to say this once," she said with forced patience, a dangerous look behind her eyes, "so listen carefully. There is extra bedding in the hall closet, and a nice empty corner in Sasuke's bedroom. I am going to set up a futon in that corner and sleep *there* ; here there are no nurses to help Sasuke if he needs something in the middle of the night, so I have to be available at all times. So before any of you get the wrong idea, don't even go there. And Naruto, I don't want this spread throughout our friends, especially Ino. There's going to be gossip in the rumor mill for weeks

as it is, what with me just living in this house. Now, are there any questions?"

There was a discomfoting silence in the kitchen.

"Good," she said, uncrossing her arms, the diabolical glint behind her eyes dissipating, "Now, can you please put my things in Sasuke's room?"

The three of them shuffled quickly to Sasuke's room without complaint, and Sakura nodded at their receding backs with approval.

"I'll be back in a minute, Sasuke," she informed the sitting Uchiha before following after her brother and two friends.

Entering Sasuke's room, she saw that her bags had been set neatly in the room's center, and the three of them were standing around, awaiting instructions. There was nothing particularly special about Sasuke's room, a closet was in the left wall and a small desk was in the back right corner. In the back left corner was a neatly made double bed, the frame designed to have a nightstand built onto the side, where a small lamp sat. There was a small window in the middle of the back wall, and a picture of Team Seven was sitting on the sill. A garbage can was in the close right corner, and a big empty space was in the close left.

"I was hoping to set up in this corner," she said indicating to the space between the closet and the wall on the left side of the room, in the big empty space, "There's a futon in the room one door further from here; Naruto, Lee-san, could you get that? Kanaye, come with me and help with the bedding."

Obediently, each went their respective ways, and Sakura opened the door to the hall closet, standing on tiptoes to grab the thick blanket that she would be using.

"So," Kanaye said in a low voice, "Why do you like this guy again?"

Sakura shoved the folded blanket into his arms and he nearly toppled over from the force of the thrust, "I know he may seem cold, but he's a good person."

She saw the top of his silver-haired head shake from side to side. "I don't understand you Sakura," his voice was muffled.

"Neither does he," she replied offhandedly, while amassing a number of pillows, "Okay, go back to the room, and watch your step."

They reentered Sasuke's room as Naruto and Lee finished unfurling the futon, and she gave them both a grateful smile, "Thanks so much, you two."

"lie, it's nothing, Sakura-chan," Naruto said rubbing the back of his head lazily.

"Hai, Sakura-san," Lee said striking the 'nice-guy' pose again, "If you ever require anything, just let me know, and I shall assist you."

"I appreciate it, really," she replied smiling.

"Oi, Sakura," Kanaye's stifled voice called out, "What should I do with this?"

"You two go to the kitchen and see what there is in the cupboards, and Kanaye will help me make the bed," Sakura suggested, "I'll come make something when we're done."

After the two of them had left, Sakura helped Kanaye set the thick blanket on Sasuke's bed before they unfolded the sheets and spread it out over the mattress.

"I don't know if I like this situation, Sakura," her brother said after a minute, "I wasn't too pleased before, but I thought that you'd at least be in different rooms."

"That's not going to work," Sakura replied tucking the sheet under one corner of the futon, "I have already explained why I need to be in

this room. I also already emphasized to you that nothing is going to happen. Additionally, if it makes you feel any better, Mom knows that I'm going to be sharing a room with him."

Kanaye sighed as he tucked in the corners at his end, "I suppose it makes me feel better in the sense that you're not hiding it from Mom and Dad, but it doesn't make me feel better about the fact that you're still sharing a room."

"Just have a little faith in me," Sakura stated, getting up and putting pillowcases on one of the three pillows she had grabbed, "It's a little insulting that you don't trust me."

"I'm sorry, Sakura," he said with a sigh, grabbing a pillowcase for himself, "It's just that I don't know this guy, and I'm out on missions so often so I don't really have time to get to know him. And you said that he won't let people know him, so I don't think we're going to become chummy after a few visits like Naruto and I did."

"I have a feeling that I won't be here long enough for you to have to get to know him," Sakura replied, grabbing the final pillow and stuffing it aggressively into its case.

"I hope you're right," Kanaye replied, tossing the pillow he held onto the futon, "The sooner you're out of here, the better, in my opinion."

"Just put up with it, okay?" Sakura told him as they began to unfold the blanket, "And if anything happens, you have my permission to come over here and come after Sasuke, but understand that you'd probably have to get through me first."

Kanaye shook his head in amazement, "I just can't believe how devoted you are."

"Live with it," Sakura smirked, before leaving the room, heading towards the kitchen.

Naruto and Lee were sitting at the table across from Sasuke and when the two of them caught sight of Sakura, they both fell silent. With disgust, Sakura surmised that they were probably giving Sasuke a similar lecture like Kanaye had just been giving her. She looked over at Lee and pretended to not notice the silence that had blanketed the kitchen.

"What's there for food?" Sakura asked him, looking at the empty table, expecting there to be something in the non-perishables that was available to eat.

"All the food has passed the expiry date," Lee replied shaking his head, "There is nothing suitable in the cupboard to eat."

Sakura sighed. They really shouldn't call it non-perishable if it was able to expire, no matter how much time would go by.

"Alright," Sakura said heavily, "Looks like I'll have to make a trip to the grocery store. Who wants to come along?"

"I'll come!" Naruto exclaimed exuberantly, leaping to his feet, "I know the best kinds of instant ramen to buy!"

"I would like to accompany you as well," Lee said standing up.

"Anyone else?" Sakura peered around the room.

"I'll stay here," Sasuke stated, his fingers laced together and resting under his nose.

"I think I will too," Kanaye said cheerfully and Sakura gave him a suspicious look, but he only waved happily in response to her cold expression.

"Alright then," she replied, knowing that she couldn't exactly argue—Sasuke shouldn't be left by himself, "Sasuke, is there anything that you would like me to buy?"

He was quiet for a moment, "Tomatoes."

"Why the heck would you want to buy tomatoes, teme?" Naruto asked, giving Sasuke a look that read 'are you crazy or something?'—not that Sasuke could see it.

"Because, dobe, some people like tomatoes," Sasuke replied evenly, "That's why."

"Come on, let's go," Sakura interjected before an argument could start.

On that last note, she shoved Naruto out of the room and quickly strode after him, Lee bringing up the rear.

Kanaye waited until he heard the back door shut before he went and sat down opposite the Uchiha boy that was the object of his sister's affections. Resting his elbows on the table, he studied the quiet youth with interest. Uchiha Sasuke was sitting cross-legged at the table, his fingers laced together and resting against his lips; dark black onyx eyes were staring unseeingly forward, unfocused.

"I didn't get a chance to properly introduce myself," he said after a very pregnant pause, "I'm Haruno Kanaye, Sakura's brother."

"Uchiha Sasuke," the boy replied evenly, but said nothing more. Kanaye felt that he probably shouldn't have been surprised.

"Yeah, I need to talk to you about a couple things," Kanaye said after another moment, sitting up straighter, resting his arms on the table.

"If it's in regards to the situation in which Sakura and I will be in while she stays here, then don't bother," Sasuke stated before Kanaye could say anything more, "I have already been spoken to about it."

"Well, it's partially about that," Kanaye said, with a sigh, "You see, Sakura and I are very close—we always have been. But ever since I became a jounin, I haven't been able to see her very much, so I worry for her, because I don't know what she's up to—if she's

hanging around with the right crowds, and so on. I've always been on the lookout for her, and it really hurts me when she's distressed."

"I see," Sasuke replied levelly, not seeming particularly interested.

"I don't know if you've heard, but after you left Konoha, Sakura fell into depression," Kanaye said austerely, wishing that the blind Uchiha could see the serious look that he was giving him.

"I've heard," Sasuke replied, "Naruto told me about it."

"Naruto doesn't know all of it," Kanaye responded heavily, "Sakura has an amazing talent for hiding her emotions when she doesn't want other people to know about how she's feeling. Or at least in public. Sakura was always cheerful and bright out in the open, smiling even though she was sad, and letting people think that she wasn't nearly upset as she was. Naruto's known her for a long time, and he could tell something was wrong, but he never saw what she was like at home."

Sasuke turned his head slightly towards the platinum-haired jounin, his face expressionless, and Kanaye found himself wondering if he was even reaching the cold youth.

"I had never seen her in a more terrible state. Every day she would come home and lock herself in her room, and wouldn't come out until mealtimes. At the dinner table it would be apparent that she had been crying, and she refused to talk about it when asked," Kanaye said darkly, "Sometimes I would go talk to her, and every time that I entered her room, she would be holding that picture of your team, or looking at it. Sometimes she'd be crying, other times she would just be staring blankly at it. I could never get anything out of her, but I tried to comfort her in any way I could, though nothing really worked."

"After I became a jounin, I wasn't available to check up on her as often, and I frequently worried. I don't think that she ever sought suicide as an answer—that wouldn't solve her problems. As for self-

inflicted pain, I don't think that ever happened either, but she was so depressed that it tore the hearts of my parents, and me too.

"Things got better once she started training under the Hokage. She had told me over and over that she felt so useless, just sitting around on missions, not doing anything—I didn't believe her, but she was so much happier when she became a medic. I guess she didn't feel so worthless now that she felt she could do something.

"Her depression spread out over two years, and it's only the past year that she's finally been the Sakura I've known my whole life. In fact, right now is probably the happiest I've ever seen her. She really did miss you, and I just want you to know that if you *ever* do anything to harm her again, I am going to have to hurt you."

"I had no intention of causing Sakura such psychological trauma," Sasuke said after a while, his voice devoid of emotion, "But you should know that I left her in the better of two situations—she probably hasn't told you that when she tried to stop me from leaving the village, that she asked me to take her with me."

Kanaye looked over at the boy with a confused and surprised look, "No, she didn't."

"Sakura is my teammate and friend, but I could not do what she asked," Sasuke continued, closing his eyes in thought, "I knew that she was not yet prepared to break all ties with Konoha, because unlike me, she does not have to protect the people she cares about. Sakura belongs in this village; her spirit resides here. I was planning on leaving for good, and she was not yet ready to handle that."

"So you considered bringing her with you?" Kanaye asked, narrowing his eyes in suspicion.

"The thought did cross my mind, yes," Sasuke admitted in a matter-of-fact tone, "More or less because the prospect of being alone frightened me at the time. I was a boy then. But it would have been foolish if I had taken her with me. And I am sure that you can agree it

was better to leave her here than to take her with me to Orochimaru. Whatever she has endured here is merciful compared to what she would have felt if I had taken her with me."

"I'm glad you didn't take her," Kanaye said after a minute, "Because then I would have hunted you down and killed you."

A twisted smile appeared on the lips of the Uchiha.

"Anyways," Kanaye said, changing the topic, convinced that Sasuke was at least respectful towards Sakura's feelings, "I'm not going to lecture you over sleeping arrangements. Even though I can't say I'm pleased with it, Sakura has assured me that things will be fine, so I believe her."

"If you want to hear the same from me, then know that I have no interest in Sakura whatsoever—in that respect." Sasuke said evenly, an icy quality in his voice, picking up on the undertone of warning in Kanaye's statement, "If I felt that there was another way, I would choose that instead. Sakura and I have already discussed the situation, and we both knew that there would be some controversy."

Kanaye looked suspiciously over at Sasuke and narrowed his royal-blue eyes perceptively. A feeling of doubt hung in his heart as his mind considered that what Sasuke said was contradicting how the Uchiha possibly felt, whether he knew it himself or not. While still doubtful, he said nothing more on the matter, and decided to change the topic of conversation.

"So, Sasuke," he spoke warmly, deciding to give the young man a chance, "Do you like ramen?"

"How come I always get the heavy stuff to carry, Sakura-chan?" Naruto whined on Sakura's left as the three of them headed back down the path to the Uchiha manor.

"You're just unlucky, that's all, Naruto," Sakura replied smiling, shaking her head at him, "Quit complaining and I'll make you an extra helping of ramen."

"Sakura-san, there is something that I wish to discuss with you before we arrive back at Sasuke-kun's house," Lee said from her right, his face serious, "I think that you should be very careful during your stay at the Uchiha household."

"Hai, Sakura-chan," Naruto agreed seriously from her left, "This whole situation is so indecent, I'm surprised you agreed to it."

Sakura glowered at the both of them, knowing that this was probably coming, but was hoping to avoid it. She understood that they were simply concerned for her well-being, but didn't they know her better than that? Sakura recalled an exercise mission Tsunade had sent her on to practice her skills in the field—the mission involved going to a town that was in a questionable condition and spy on a group of rebels that had been bothering the Feudal Lord of a neighbouring nation. On the excursion, Sakura had run into some trouble with a lecherous old man who had begun to follow her for the better part of an afternoon. Needless to say the man was now short a few teeth and was probably suffering a limp from the broken leg she had given him.

"It was necessary, and I was the one who suggested it," Sakura stated firmly, and would have put her hands on her hips if they were not weighed down by groceries, "I'll be fine you two. Lee, you were on that mission when we had to go to the Red Bean country. Remember that old man?"

"Hai, I do, Sakura-san," Lee nodded at her, "But he was not a shinobi, and I am sure Sasuke will not fall so easily."

"Why is everyone afraid that Sasuke is going to try something on me?" Sakura exclaimed angrily, turning her head heavenwards and rolling her eyes, "I assure that nothing is going to happen. *N-o-t-h-i-n-g* at ALL."

"Oi, Sakura-chan," Naruto spoke up in concern, "Sasuke may not try anything like *that* , but I think the bastard may care about you more than he realizes."

Sakura actually laughed at the notion, "Naruto, how would you know if Sasuke likes me any more than he's letting on? Don't you go claiming to be perceptive on Sasuke's feelings if you can't even realize how Hinata feels about *you* ."

Naruto turned and looked at her, running up a little to peer at her curiously, "Eh? How does Hinata-chan feel about me? Oi, Sakura-chan, answer me! How does Hinata feel about me?!"

Sakura just shook her head in amazement at how dense Naruto could be. But then again, maybe there was something to what he was suggesting. Naruto may be dense, but he wasn't stupid. But then it was Sasuke they were talking about—if it had been anyone else, then Sakura may have paid more heed to the fox-faced boy's words.

"I am inclined to agree with Naruto-kun," Lee said concernedly, "While I believe that Sasuke-kun may appear not to show any feelings towards anyone, you must not overlook the fact that he may become more attached to you as time passes. I do not know whether it could be merely friendship or something more, but please be cautious."

"I'll be careful, you two, I promise," Sakura said, shaking her head. She was very skeptical that anything would happen at all, "Just trust me—trust Sasuke; nothing is going to happen."

"If anything happens at all, I will beat Sasuke until all his dead relatives will feel it!" Naruto exclaimed striking a determined pose.

"Hey! Be careful with the groceries!" she scolded, as Naruto grinned sheepishly at her.

She needed little convincing that Naruto would keep his word.

There was a discomforting silence between the three of them before Naruto suddenly exclaimed: "Hold on! What *does* Hinata-chan think of me?"

A/N: I loved writing the lectures—its lots of fun to cause trouble, has anyone noticed?

I had another thought, but I lost it. Oh—while I was trying to find my last thought, another one came. Can someone tell me why in a lot of fanfictions, Sasuke has this tendency to enjoy tomatoes? It's not like I find anything strange about that...after all, I'll take a tomato and eat it like it's an apple...but I just hear it mentioned over and over, and I just want to know where that comes from. :p

Chapter 13

A/N: It was almost three weeks since I started this story when I wrote this chapter. I've already surpassed my longest story as far as chapters go; it took me almost two years to get twelve chapters for *Picking Up the Pieces* and I've done thirteen for *Blind* in less than three weeks! x.x I guess those are the kinds of results you get from "inspiration/current obsession/motivation" vs. "writer's block/dead obsession/laziness".

Anyways, thanks for the answers on the question towards Sasuke's taste in tomatoes. I had a feeling that it might have said somewhere that it was his favourite food, but I couldn't find anything. Thanks to those who answered the question! (smiles)

Chapter 13: Juxtaposition

Sasuke heard Sakura impart some departing words to the trio that had just spent the noon hour with them, and close the door soon afterwards. He himself was eating a sliced up tomato which Sakura had put out for him, on what he guessed was a long, narrow sushi dish. He prodded a wedge of the fruit experimentally before picking it up neatly, and bringing it to his mouth. He chewed slowly on the piece, listening carefully for Sakura's approaching footsteps while he savored the tangy flavour of the tomato, enjoying the sour taste.

He caught the sound of Sakura's footfalls as she walked back down the hall and towards the kitchen; she sighed heavily as she entered before taking a seat down opposite him. He heard a sort of 'flump,' which he assumed was her flopping down across the table amid the dirty dishes.

"I can't believe them sometimes," he heard her say, her voice muffled.

He raised a composed eyebrow, taking another slice of tomato. "Why is that?" he asked her, knowing that she could not see his inquisitive look, so he had to speak, even if he would have preferred not to.

"They each gave me a talking to about the accommodation arrangements," she said, sounding like she was sitting up, " 'I don't know about this, Sakura.' 'I'm not comfortable with this, Sakura.' 'Be careful, Sakura.' Honestly!"

He smirked slightly, "It's not like we weren't expecting something like this."

"I know, I know—I just thought that they would be a little more understanding, and not so against it. I mean, we both are clear of the situation, we're sensible, and it's not like it's going to be forever," Sakura replied wearily, then after a moment, added with a tone with grim amusement, "It's kinda funny—they were all worried about you trying something, but nobody seemed worried that *I'd* try and seduce *you*. A little unfair if you ask me."

"I'm single, a criminal, and male," he told her simply, "I fit the stereotypical profile."

"Yeah, yeah," Sakura replied offhandedly, "But I would have thought that Naruto would know you well enough..."

She trailed off and sighed. It sounded like she was getting to her feet, and after a few seconds he heard a cupboard open, followed by the clattering of dishes.

"I could have sworn I saw a teapot around here somewhere..." he heard her mutter to herself; Sasuke just put another piece of tomato in his mouth, "—Aha! Do you want some tea, Sasuke?"

"Aa."

"Any particular kind? I bought some regular tea, green tea and some jasmine tea," she asked him kindly while he heard the tap come on.

"It doesn't matter," he replied, poking around the dish for any more pieces of tomato, but found no more. He set his chopsticks aside he listened to Sakura scuffle about the room; he put his chin in his palm and thought about his own share of lectures. As he listened to Sakura prattle on happily about being able to find everything that was on her shopping list, he found it hard to imagine her in the depressive state that her brother had described her in.

Naruto had said it was bad; Kanaye said it was worse. Yet as he sat in the kitchen, Sakura brewing a pot of tea and chatting away, he couldn't help get the feeling that he was missing something. She had missed him, they said, but she showed no signs of being overjoyed at his return. She had been so depressed, they had told him, yet she was so cheerful now, and showed no indication of ever being in that state.

He jumped slightly as there was a light 'thunk' of a mug of steaming tea being set before him, the noise jolting him out of his thoughts.

"I made it mild, but I can get you a stronger cup if you like," Sakura said warmly, seeming to have gotten over the lectures she got.

"This is fine," he told her, feeling for the mug in the direction of the noise.

"Little to your left," she said in an almost automatic tone.

He found the cup to the left of his hand like she had said, and wrapped his hands around the warm crockery, feeling the heat in his hands. Taking a sip, he noted that it was a little weaker than he usually liked, but did not want to bother her for more, so he just drank it quietly.

Within the single week he had been in Konoha, he had come to grow used to Sakura helping him, and didn't mind so much anymore. She

in turn had become accustomed to warn him about little things in the area that he would be unaware of, giving him the heads up before he discovered it the hard way. Her descriptions were still so-so, but he supposed they were a little better than before, and they sufficed enough to get him a rough picture in his mind.

She hadn't described the house to him, not that she needed to really; he had grown up in this place, and there were memories of each room that he held clear in his mind—some considerably less pleasant than others. Unless the Hokage had upended his house in order to come up with any more non-existent evidence that he had long-term dealings with Orochimaru, things should have been left the same. He didn't know if anyone had bothered to sort through the belongings from his apartment and wondered if they were sitting in some heap in the house somewhere.

"You seem preoccupied," Sakura told him from across the table, "What's on your mind?"

"Nothing important," he replied before taking another sip from his tea, "What were you planning on doing this afternoon?"

"Well, there are an endless number of things that need to be done this afternoon," she said serenely, and there was a small noise that suggested she was stirring her tea in an absent-minded fashion, "Having cleaned the house shortened the list considerably, seeing as all the clothes, bedding and dishes have been washed. But I still need to wash the dishes from lunch today and unpack, which I'm guessing might take half the afternoon."

"You brought too many things if it is going to take you that long to unpack," he mused quietly.

"Well, we'll just see how long it actually takes," she replied in that tone of voice that made him imagine her smiling, "And I'm feeling really tired too. Having a low chakra reserve and dealing with Ino are taking their toll."

"I don't think I've heard anyone shout like that before," he told her smirking, and to his amusement, he heard her choke on her tea.

"Were we really that loud?" she asked him, sounding embarrassed, "I didn't think you'd be able to hear us."

He shrugged lightly.

"Yeah..." Sakura laughed uneasily, before abruptly changing the topic, "I think I'm going to start washing the dishes."

He snorted slightly in amusement and drank the rest of his tea, setting the mug out with the sushi tray that had held the tomato wedges. Sakura cleared the dishes away in a few minutes and there was the sound of running water as she filled up the sink. The quiet sound of scrubbing reached his ears as Sakura began to wash down the dishes; he could see her in his mind's eye standing where his mother had used to stand quietly ridding the tableware of bits of food. Imagining Sakura standing there in that exact same spot, seeing her in his mind, standing happily and quietly, he was strongly reminded of his mother. And it was strange, but to him, Sakura just seemed to fit there, to sit nicely in the picture, to just...belong.

"You're quiet," she said after a moment, "Quieter than usual, that is."

"I haven't been in this house for four years," he replied, in his mind he could see her turn to face him, a concerned expression on her face.

"Oh, that's right," she said kindly, the quiet scrubbing noise in the background, "This must be a memory-invoking experience for you right now."

Though it was left unmentioned, the event of his clan's slaughter came to both their minds, hanging suspended tensely in the air. She had no idea.

"Aa."

"The familiarity of the house should help you adapt to the new location fairly quickly. I hope that in a few weeks you'll be able to make your way about the building on your own," Sakura continued, veering the conversation in a slightly different direction, causing the tension to go slack, "It should help you get used to walking around without having another reference point to gage your direction off of. I mean, you'll always need help when presented to new locations, but once you're familiar with an area, you should be fine on your own. – You're a private person, Sasuke, and I know that having to rely on me is probably not how you would normally have things, but its only for a little while."

"How long?" he asked, sounding a little rudier than he had intended.

"It's different for each person, but knowing you, it could be two month to three months," Sakura replied thoughtfully before she pulled the plug in the sink and the sound of the water could be heard draining out; an interesting sound, "I was planning on training you throughout the processes, and help you master the basics in your current state, however when the rehab is finished, you can have me continue to stay here and assist you in staying a shinobi, or you can send me home and I can come over everyday instead."

"I see," he considered both options in his head. While it would be more convenient for Sakura to stay living in his house, he thought maybe sending her home would be better. There would only be more controversy if she stayed longer, and he did not enjoy being threatened by Naruto, no matter ridiculous or empty the threats sounded.

"You don't have to decide now," she said, as there was the rustling of fabric and the occasional clank of dishes; he assumed that she was now drying them, "It's still a little early to tell where we'll be at that point. You might have gotten a handle on your skills before rehab is finished, though I doubt it'll be that easy."

That was true, he pondered to himself, raising his chin off of his palm and lacing his fingers together, resting his hands on his lips. He

would see how things went with Sakura living with him before considering what action to take—she was being almost the opposite of her former fangirling self, and he supposed that she had been very tolerable up to this point, so living with her might not end up so bad. And as she said before, it was only for a short time—a couple months—and even if he couldn't stand her presence, she'd be gone after a time.

"After you've unpacked, what were you planning to do for the rest of the afternoon?" he asked; sounds indicated that she was now putting the clean dishes away.

"Well, it's up to you really," she said passively, closing a cupboard door, "I was thinking we could go out for our afternoon stroll, or we could skip that and go directly to object recognition, or we could go out into the jungle that's your backyard and begin preparing you to get back on training—but I wouldn't recommend that...I want the grass to be mowed first, and the weeds cleared out. I was going to hire a group of genin for that."

He smirked slightly; "Naruto would disapprove of you giving a lame mission to a group of capable ninja."

Sakura gave a musical laugh, "I suppose he would be, but if he has any complaints, he can do it himself—without pay. Anyways, here's my question for you: what do you want to do while I'm unpacking?"

"I'll keep you company," he replied after a moment; he didn't need to see in order to know that Sakura was giving him a surprised look. He gave a light shrug—it wasn't like he had anything better to do anyways.

Sakura spent the better part of the afternoon unpacking her things, putting her packed clothes in the other end of Sasuke's closet, and setting up her toiletries in the bathroom out of the way. She took the small lamp that was sitting on Sasuke's desk and set it up in a convenient gap between her futon and the closet door. She also

managed to find a place to put a number of her medical textbooks where Sasuke wouldn't accidentally stumble over them; she wanted to keep on top of her studies, despite the time she would have off from the hospital.

Sasuke had sat around on his bed, his back against the wall, silent for the most part. She tried to make chitchat, but his responses were direct, abrupt and impossible to build on. It was hard to tell what Sasuke was feeling most of the time, and she was wondering what he was thinking about that caused him to be distant today—more distant than usual, she added mentally. There wasn't much for him to do around here—if he had liked to read, it was impossible for him to do so now, and it was too early for him to be training; he still was having difficulties standing on his own for extended periods of time.

The garden was not ideal for training at the moment either, as she had said earlier to him, and this set back plans yet another day. She knew that Sasuke didn't like to sit around and do nothing; he would always find some sort of training to do, to refine his skills. But wait—there was perhaps something they could do as far as training went.

"Sasuke?" Sakura inquired straightening up and stretching out as she finished organizing the last of her things, "I think I thought of something we could do for training."

"Hn?"

She smiled slightly at the inquisitive sound, "We could practice your fire ninjutsu. You haven't been at practice with those in days—I'm sure you don't want to get rusty."

"There's a small lake in a park near here," he told her, reaching for her arm as she came to help him stand up, "I used to practice there in order to keep from burning anything down."

"We'll go there then," she smiled, leading him carefully from the room.

The journey through the house was fine, as Sasuke knew the area, and apart from a little miscalculation in relativity—being a lot larger than he was when he was thirteen—he did just fine. The trek through the garden was a little more treacherous as she was afraid a branch would poke his newly healed eyes. It was when they were maneuvering around a particularly invasive caragana bush that Sakura found herself rather frustrated.

"You know, this really is impractical," she remarked with a frown, hating the introduced species—caragana thrived in Konoha and if it was left alone could cause a ton of trouble when someone tried to get rid of them.

After making it through the yard again, Sasuke told her that there was no spare key to the front gate, which meant they'd have to jump over it again. Considering that Kanaye was unavailable to assist Sasuke, and they had no idea if there were any people on the other side of the gate, Sakura was a little uncertain about the jump.

Sakura had jokingly suggested that Sasuke use the Chidori to blast the gate away, but she received a blunt and serious answer of 'no.' It was only after Sakura had checked that there were no people on the other side that she decided it was probably best if they just jump, whether Kanaye was there or not. As they sailed through the air, Sakura prayed that they would land all right, because she really did not think she was up to healing any snapped bones at the moment. Apart from Sasuke stumbling so terribly that it was embarrassing, he managed to get over unscathed, and Sakura wondered dimly in her mind how on earth she could help him regain his jumping skills.

There were numerous, unmerciful stares at the two of them as they walked down the road, Sasuke giving her directions, and Sakura glowered at anyone who had their gaze lingering too long on the both of them, knowing that the gossip around this part of town was notorious, due mostly to the fact of its history. Numerous local myths and legends had sprung up everywhere, mostly involving the ghosts of the Uchiha clans, vengeful spirits, etc. Sakura was determined to make sure that Sasuke would never hear any of these rumors,

knowing that they would probably make him angry and feel that the memory of the Uchihas was being disgraced.

"I remember this park..." Sakura said as they approached it from down the path, "I sometimes would come here with the training kunoichi to gather flowers for our assignments. It hasn't changed much from that time...the trees are bigger, as expected, but..."

"Do you see the lake?" he asked her as they drew closer.

"Hai..." she replied absently, "It looks a little gross today because it's reflecting the overcast sky, but it's not raining, so I suppose I shouldn't complain."

That last statement brought to mind the conversation she had had with Sasuke after he had finished talking with Mitarashi Anko, questioning him casually over why he had been concerned over why she was out in the rain or not. He gave a typical Sasuke answer, and Sakura wondered why she had been so surprised. Of course Sasuke wouldn't want a sick healer, why else would he care? Her own illness would hinder his recovery.

She hadn't bothered to explain to him that you could not catch a cold from being out in the rain, but the cold weather would weaken your body so that you were more susceptible to catching something from someone else. Either that or you could get hypothermia, but only if you stayed outside for a ridiculously long time and it was a lot colder than it had been when they were outside.

"Is the dock fastened down?" she asked him as they descended the walking path down to the lakebed, "Or does it change with the water level of the lake?"

"It is fastened down," he replied evenly, "Why?"

"Well, you feel dizzy and unsteady without my holding onto you, and I can't imagine a wobbling dock would make you feel any better," she mused lightly, taking a turn towards the dock.

"How wide across is the lake?" he asked her, not going further into the matter.

"Um, about a hundred meters across both ways," she replied, taking her turn to ask a question, "How come?"

"My jutsus are more powerful than before I left, I don't want to scorch the other side," he replied, "It should be fine as long as I just practice the minor ones."

At the end of the dock, Sakura let go of Sasuke's arm and took a step away from him, close enough to grab him if the lightheadedness overrode his sense of balance and caused him to fall over. He braced his feet into a defensive stance, preparing himself for training.

"Show me all the hand signs," she instructed, clasping her hands behind her, "Just to see how well you do them without hand-eye coordination—remember how Iruka-sensei would always reprimand the students who looked at their hands while doing the different symbols? Yeah, well, just checking."

He showed her each of the twelve different hand signs that were unique to each animal of the zodiac, starting with the rat and ending in the boar. Impressed, but not the least bit surprised, she uttered a small 'okay' and stood behind him as he began to work out a pattern of hand signs to use the first jutsu.

As he performed the last seal, he brought his hand to his mouth, and holding it so that it looked like a pipe was between his fingers, he exhaled with a great force, fire spilling out over the lake's waters. Sakura couldn't remember the name, but had seen this jutsu before; this time, however, it was probably eight, or ten times larger than she had seen it before. The huge fireball easily covered the lake's entire surface, reaching a height as tall as the hospital. Her eyes widened as he continued to blow, the duration lasting considerably longer than she had expected. The searing heat of the flames washed over her and she gazed in amazement as the center of the enormous

mass of fire glowed white hot. After a couple more minutes, the fireball died away, and Sasuke straightened up, a crooked smile on his lips.

She stared out over the lake, the water level was lower and there was a distinct dampness from the steam in the air. "Wow, Sasuke, that was just—" she started, absolutely amazed, but then was cut off as she noted on the far side of the lake, the grass had caught fire, "—kuso."

"What?" he asked her, turning to face her, but she was busy making some hand signs of her own.

She used the last of her expendable chakra to force the water's mass to roll up onto the far shore, extinguishing the flames that had begun to spread. After all the flames had been encompassed by water, she let her grasp on it go, and it rolled neatly back down the hill into the lake. She blushed as she saw that a number of people who were out for a stroll had stopped and stared at the two of them on the dock.

"I think you underestimated yourself," she told Sasuke as his inquisitive look had turned into a troubled frown, "Don't worry, I extinguished the flames on the other side of the lake, but I think we need a better practice spot."

A grin passed over Sasuke's face, and she was sure that he found the whole prospect amusing rather than alarming.

"And we'll have to wait for a torrent of rainstorms before the lake water level will return to normal," she added, a smile coming to her face, "Either we can continue to evaporate the lake, or we can work instead on chakra control."

"It always had too much water in it," he told her, turning towards the lake again, starting a routine of different hand symbols, "But I will try not to incinerate the other side."

It was late evening when the two of them arrived home, having spent the duration of the afternoon reviewing Sasuke's basic jutsus, leaving the lake considerably emptier than before. They made a stop at the Hokage mansion on the way home so that Sakura could request a genin group to come clean out the yard. Sakura was impressed that Sasuke managed all the stairs just fine, only stumbling once when she had failed to tell him when the stairs ended at the top. Inner Sakura was still hurting herself for letting it slip.

By the time they reached the Uchiha manor, the both of them were feeling exhausted from the over-use of chakra, and Sakura didn't want to deal with jumping the fence again, so she merely used her last remaining strength to tear the lock off of the gate.

Sasuke had snickered slightly at her impatience and she decided to just ignore it, not knowing what to say in response anyway. She had then made a light supper, in which they had lightly discussed the upcoming night's sleep; Sakura had then quickly washed the dishes and helped Sasuke to his feet, holding on to his arm as they both headed to the bathroom.

"Here, let me help you with that," she said kindly, taking the toothbrush from him, which he was determinedly trying to put the toothpaste on the toothbrush, without missing it. He handed her the toothbrush roughly, shoving his hands in his pockets afterwards, glowering in a frustrated manner. She merely smiled as she dabbed a pea-sized gob of toothpaste on the end of the brush before rinsing it with a little bit of water.

"Here—it's mint, I hope you don't mind," she said as he pulled his hands out of his pockets, extending one towards her. She took his hand and brushed her thumb over the back, handing him the brush with her other hand. She watched with slight interest as he seemed to use both his hands to determine the length of the brush before attempting to stick it in his mouth.

Sakura applied some toothpaste to her own brush as she watched Sasuke in the mirror. It was easy for him to brush his teeth, as it was

a task mainly done by feel. A spark of curiosity came to her as she noted that Sasuke was brushing his teeth in a somewhat hurried manner, brushing quickly over one spot a number of times for a short duration before switching to another spot. She herself was brushing her own teeth at an unhurried pace, and as she was only switching to the second portion of her mouth, Sasuke put his free hand on the counter, feeling along the edge until his fingers brushed the rim of the sink. He elbowed her gently and she shifted away so that he could spit the toothpaste into the basin. She blinked at him.

"Do you always brush your teeth that quickly?" she asked him, her own toothbrush still in her mouth.

He nodded in response as he began to feel around for a glass.

"Upper right," she told him, leaning against the counter while his hand clasped the cup.

When he was finished filling the glass with water, Sakura took the moment to spit her toothpaste into the sink and reach for her own glass. They had really pushed their limits that day; she had sat him through a two hour healing session that morning, which had drained almost all her chakra, and the last of it had been used to extinguish the flames that had sprung up after Sasuke had used the first jutsu. Meanwhile, he himself had used his chakra on the jutsus, and while he had been holding back so that he wouldn't incinerate the park, the performance was still spectacular—and draining.

"I'm going to go to bed," he said putting his glass down on the counter, his hand bracing against the wall of the small room. Even though it was a basic statement, she knew that he was asking her to take him to his room.

"Okay."

Walking over to him, she grasped his arm securely and led him out of the room and the short distance from the bathroom to his bedroom. She sat him down on the edge of the bed and then

preceded to one of her bags by her futon, digging around for the pair of pajamas she had brought. Behind her, she heard Sasuke moving around, and glancing over her shoulder, she saw that he had taken off his shirt and let it drop to the floor. Either ignoring her, or simply not noticing that she was watching him, he crawled into his bed. After he untied his forehead protector and tucked it under his pillow, he lay down, pulling the covers up to his chin, facing the wall.

She turned back to her bag; after grabbing the folded pajamas she had set on top, she straightened up and headed to the doorway. "I'm going to go change," she told him, lingering in the doorframe of the room.

"Aa."

She quickly changed in the bathroom, pulling on the pale pink flannel pajama pants and a white spaghetti-strap tank top, her mind rather fogged, and she was almost running on autopilot. Wandering back to Sasuke's room, clutching her dirty clothes in her arms, she looked over at his form in the bed before putting her laundry aside. She went over and picked up his discarded shirt and frowned faintly at him. Tossing the shirt at his resting form, she mused at his small jump when it landed on him.

"Don't leave your dirty clothes on the floor," she reprimanded, throwing back the covers of her own futon, "This is my room too now, and I don't want it messy."

She heard a quiet 'tch'.

"Don't 'tch' me," she said with a small smirk, "Leave anything more on the floor and you'll end up tripping on it—or I'll throw it at you."

Flumping down onto her futon she snuggled down amongst the blankets, rolling onto her side, her arms reflexively seizing one of the extra pillows. She had always been that way, ever since she was a child—she had always felt the need to hang onto something when

she slept. As a kid, her favourite stuffed animal had been squeezed to death while Sakura slept, but now she usually clutched a pillow.

"Just so you know," she said to Sasuke after a quiet minute, "I hardly move in my sleep, just so you don't think I'm dead or anything."

"I know you don't move around a lot in your sleep," he replied quietly, "Sometimes on our genin missions Naruto would get up and check on you, just to make sure that you *weren't* dead. I hardly got any sleep because of it sometimes."

So that's what Naruto had been doing when she woke sometimes to find him peering down at her. Whoops, guess she owed him some apologies for hitting him so hard. But she had forgotten that Sasuke had been there with them, too. She blushed; sometimes it was hard to remember that Sasuke was the same person who had been on those missions with their group all those years back. Some elements of him were familiar, but others made him seem like a total stranger.

"Well, sometimes I couldn't sleep because he was moving around *too* much," she retorted quietly, burying her face in the pillow she had glomped to her chest.

He gave a light snort in amusement.

Closing her eyes, she let out a tired sigh, looking forward to the sleep that was needed. Not only as chakra low within her, exhaustion from the past week was catching up with her. Dimly she noted that she needed to find some time for her own training; if she needed to train Sasuke as well, it would not do good to fall out of shape. She should probably see if she could find some others willing to help her train Sasuke, because fighting against one opponent wouldn't help him improve.

"Sakura?"

"Yeah?" she murmured sleepily, her mind half-hazed.

"You're brother's a good man," Sasuke said after a moment.

She rolled slightly onto her back, and peered at his bare back from over her shoulder in an inquisitive manner. "Huh—? Well, I mean, I know, but... Why? What did he say to you?"

"I was given a lecture," came the quiet reply, seeming amused.

"Kanaye, you bastard," she muttered quietly to the ceiling, then glanced over at Sasuke again, "And that makes you think he's a good man?"

"He's a good brother," Sasuke stated evenly, still not moving from his position, "He expresses concern for you well being."

"Sometimes I wish he wouldn't," Sakura sighed, rolling to lie fully on her back, her eyes fixed on the ceiling.

"You are lucky to have a brother like Kanaye," Sasuke said sharply, rolling onto his back so that his face was turned towards her, an intense and serious frown on his face, "And don't ever take that for granted, Sakura."

A surprised look came to her own face, staring back at him in shock. There was a severity in his words that just challenged her to tell him that she couldn't care less about how Kanaye felt about her. She blinked, and then slowly realization dawned on her, a notion coming to her. It would explain why he felt so strongly as he did about the issue.

"I suppose Itachi was nothing like Kanaye," she replied so quietly that she was barely audible to even herself.

"That's not the point," he shot angrily, rolling onto his side again, facing the wall.

Sakura firmly believed that it was, but didn't say anything. She tried to imagine what it would be like to have a brother like Itachi, but

couldn't even begin to grasp what Sasuke had felt to find his clan dead the hands of his own brother.

"Kanaye and I are close."

"How much older is he than you?" Sasuke asked after a contemplative moment.

"Five years," Sakura replied, her need for sleep seeming to have been dissipated and forgotten, "He turned twenty-two at the beginning of May."

Sasuke was silent for a moment, like he was thinking about something. "He's a good brother," he told her again, before falling quiet.

She knew what he said was true—having been on a team with both Sasuke and Naruto, neither of which had any family left, she had come to appreciate her own family more than she had before. But right now, as she stared at Sasuke's back, she would have given anything at that moment, even her family, to have Itachi be a brother to Sasuke like Kanaye had been to her.

A/N: A couple of you noted that the last chapter seemed slightly like a filler chapter, and I suppose the same could be said about this one too. I hate writing chapters like these, they take me forever to write; however they are important in character development, adjusting to a new setting, and are important with building Sasuke and Sakura's relationship. Just be a little patient :p

Chapter 14

A/N: For once I don't have anything to say here O.o Which is unusual for me.

Just a small note for Okami Kage who asked me to answer their review at this beginning of this chapter: Thanks for your suggestion, but I already have the story figured out from beginning to end. While your idea was a good one, I already have one—which is similar to your suggestion—but isn't entirely the same. As for—what would appear to be—an advantage, if you think about it, Itachi would totally pwn Sasuke as he is right now. I mean, you can't even see where the attacks are coming from—not to mention that Sasuke got pwned by Itachi while he *could* see. :p

Chapter Fourteen: Ice Cube

The half moon hung low in the sky that night, its partial face tinged a strange orange, looking like a yellowed, wicked grin against the blanket of night: a grin of malicious intent. Wispy tendrils of dark cloud drifted across it on occasion, like a mask, hiding deception and ill will. It was in such a position that Itachi found himself, standing in the shadows of the forest's edge. Around him, two other subordinate members of the Akatsuki lurked, waiting on him to give the command to strike.

He turned his crimson Sharingan orbs to gaze down upon the village that lay nestled in the foothills of the land, cradled away, safe from outside dangers. The outward appearance was very deceptive in itself, as the village probably suffered more tragedies than any other in the neighbouring area. Within that village, was something more malicious, and full of ill will than any of the Akatsuki members had—put together. The village also had an odd tendency to experience regular lightning storms, which only increased the poverty of the

area. But it was not surprising that there were many lightning storms in this area; no, Itachi understood very well the reason why this somewhat outlandish natural phenomenon occurred. Within that village, there was a terrible power, a power of cunning and cruelty, a power that was desired by the group.

Raising his hand slightly, he gave a small signal, the two other rogue ninja leaping forth into the shadows of the night, darting down into the darkness that blanketed the quiet village. There was a distinct aura coming from this village, Itachi noticed, closing his eyes for a moment. It was the sense of fear that loomed over the sleeping complex like a thick shroud. Fear was a good thing—it could be manipulated, and used.

He opened his eyes again and leapt silently down to join his comrades; coming up beside one, he nodded mutely as he indicated down the road, making a few more hand signs that gave further instruction. Taking up the lead, he dashed down the road towards the half moon that had now turned a hue of deep crimson; glancing up at it, he merely blinked, and betrayed no further emotion. He halted to a sudden stop as a drunk stumbled out of an alleyway nearby, falling to the ground dead. The man's body was glanced at briefly, and then ignored; Itachi had reacted automatically upon the drunk's movement and so quickly that it appeared he had just fallen dead out of the alley. Now there was a corpse left in the street—if the body was found before they completed their task, it could cause a delay. Things would not be anymore difficult; no...it would just slow them down.

The two other subordinates drew level with Itachi, as he reached the corner of the street, peering out into the darkness. A small market square was before them, devoid of the daytime merchants. It was here.

Using the Sharingan, he glanced around the edge of the square quickly, checking for anyone who might be around—whether foe or just unlucky bystander—before entering the square. He indicated for the Akatsuki subordinates to follow and pointed a cobblestone in the

off to the side. It was laced with the tiny amount of chakra that indicated an exploding tag, but with his eyes he could see it faintly along the tile's edge. Carefully the cobblestone was removed, and the tag pocketed, revealing a narrow tunnel that dropped straight downward. Glancing at the smaller of the two subordinates, he nodded in confirmation.

Slipping down into the hole, there was a small thud, as he landed a few meters below; Itachi scanned the square once again for good measure. There was a lighting of a torch below and a quiet birdcall, indicating that the vicinity was safe for entry.

"Remember," Itachi said to the remaining subordinate, "We are to get what we came for, if the villagers get in our way, do not hesitate to be rid of them."

Without waiting for a response or indication that he had been understood, Itachi lowered himself down into the hole, landing neatly next to the ninja with the torch. He glanced at him for a moment then turned his gaze in the area in which they stood. A wide tunnel stretched out before them going on for a long ways; a quiet dripping could be heard every now and again, followed by a minute wailing of wind. The hole had an opening at two ends.

"Anything?" he asked quietly, his inquiry echoing ever so slightly before fading away.

There was a shake of the head, and Itachi narrowed his eyes. He was at least expecting a guard to be posted, if there were no guards, then most likely traps. Traps, or the villagers were fools. If what they were keeping contained lay ahead, he could expect traps to be laid for someone trying to leave, rather than go in. Confidently, but not once dropping his guard, he proceeded forward into the darkness.

Wordlessly they traveled in the dank underground, their steps echoing on the hard ground, and squishing in patches of mud. Though he kept it subtle, Itachi avoided stepping through the mud when possible, the sound irking him to an endless degree.

Tap...tap...tap...squish.

Outwardly he blinked, but a shiver had run down his spine and the sound. An image of a kunai being plunged into a man's heart flashed in front of his eyes for a moment.

Squish.

A katana being ripped through an old woman.

Squish.

Shuriken being bombarded into a small child.

Squish...squish...squish.

Each image was worse than the last, but his eyes remained fixed on the path ahead as the pictures flashed across his mind. He blinked again as another image came across his mind: a man standing in a ready stance, positioning himself protectively in front of a frightened woman, a katana pointed threateningly at the both of them.

Squish.

The man lay dead, his innards spilling out onto the wooden floor; the woman was sobbing, pleading—

Tap...tap...tap...

Itachi and the subordinate passed out of the patch of mud, coming onto hard stone floor again. Not a single trap so far. This village really was full of idiots, just like the village he had left nine years previous; the lives of fools were useless lives, lives depending on the lives of the powerful. There was no purpose for fools in this world—there was no point in them living. In his mind he could see the woman lying dead, his thirteen year old self standing over both the bodies, his eyes lingering on the trailing blood—the blood of his parents.

They were all fools, all of them.

"Itachi-sama?"

He turned his gaze to rest on the ninja who accompanied him, and realized that he had been standing still in front of a wall that had risen up before them. A small door was built into the side of the wall, a piece of paper connecting the frame to the slab in the wall: a seal. Fools. They knew enough to fear the terror that was on the other side of the door, but the most they did to protect themselves was to put a simple seal on the door? Reaching out with his hand, he snatched the piece of paper off the door and crumpled it in his hands.

Grasping the handle, he slid the door open, his Sharingan eyes peering perceptively into the room. He motioned for the subordinate to step forward, and upon the entrance of light into the room, there was a cry, followed by some scuffling. Itachi turned his gaze onto the small wretched creature that had scampered into the corner and was not quivering with fear. A girl—late teens—with sandy hair and caramel eyes was curled up in the corner, looking at them in abject terror. Dressed in rags, sporting an anorexic frame, and looking like she had ever bathed in her entire life, Itachi noted with contempt that he had probably never seen a more pitiful creature...save for one other.

Ignoring the girl, he peered up at the ceiling where a grate resided high above; this was probably where food was dropped down. Whoever was keeping this girl was compassionate enough to keep her alive, but did not know that her sickly state could provoke that which they feared to emerge. He looked down at the girl again and took a step forward.

"Come," he ordered in a low tone, but the girl refused to move.

"W-who are you?" she choked out fearfully, wringing her hands in fear.

"I am Uchiha Itachi," he told the girl evenly, "And I have come here to free you."

A curious expression passed over the girl's face, "Free...? But why? ...Don't you hate me?"

His voice was devoid of emotion; he took another step forward, "Hate you?"

"Everyone else d-does," the girl seemed nervous about the closing space between them, "That's why they keep me here. They hate me."

"They hate you because they fear you. They fear you because they don't understand you," Itachi said evenly, "I do not hate you, because I do not fear you, and I do not fear you because I understand that which instills fear on this village."

"What are you saying?" the girl hugged her knees; she was pressing herself against the back wall, almost like she hoped it would swallow her.

"There is something kept inside of you, something so powerful and evil that they hate," Itachi replied calmly, "I want it from you, and if you give it to me, they will no longer hate you. But you must come with me, or they will leave you down here forever."

The girl sat up a little straighter, looking at herself in confusion, "Something powerful and evil..."

"A demon resides within you," Itachi took another step, and this time the girl did not flinch away, "Come with me, and I shall free you of it. And when it is gone, you can return here, and they will accept you."

"A-accept me..." the girl murmured, "And all I have to do is come with you?"

"Yes."

There was a long pause before the girl stood slowly to her feet, her legs and arms no more than skin and bone, "I want to come, please...please take me. I'll do anything; just get this thing out of me. I just want them to like me...I don't want to be hated anymore..."

A foolish child, Itachi noted condescendingly, but she was needed. It was only for a while anyways; once the process was complete, the girl would die. A fool's death—an unnoticed death. Apart from the shock and fear that she was missing, the village wouldn't care that she was gone, and over time they would forget her.

He beckoned the child to come forth, and on wobbly legs, the girl did. He ruffled the girl's dirty hair in pretended affection and took the torch from his companion.

"Help her," he ordered coldly as they entered the mouth of the tunnel.

Slowly they made their way along the tunnel's expanse, not making hardly any noise. The girl was slung over the back of Itachi's companion, and was so weak that she could barely keep consciousness. It was probably the power of the demon within that wretched body that kept her alive each day, without it, she would be dead. The girl had better live through this—at least long enough to remove the demon. Then the girl could die for all he cared—die a fool's death, a death not worth mentioning.

Tap...tap...tap...

And then there were those, he told himself quietly, who were so pathetic that they didn't even deserve death.

Squish.

His brother's distraught and anguished form lay crumpled at the bodies of his parents. 'Why?' 'How?' The questions were echoing in his head. He didn't need to answer to that brat—the lowest of the low, the biggest fool of all. Itachi blinked the memory away, his

brother's fearful sobs fading with it. It was true, he found himself emphasizing to himself, there were some people too pitiful to kill.

A loud rumbling and roar, followed by a thunderous pattering, caused Sasuke to sit bolt upright in his bed, reaching for a kunai that he remembered was nearby. After groping around under his pillow for a second, he brushed the forehead protector and paused. No, he wasn't in Orochimaru's fortress—they weren't under attack. The darkness around him wasn't from the dark windowless room, but rather the blindness that he suffered. He was in his bed, at the Uchiha manor, in the Village Hidden in the Leaves. He shook his head at his reaction, but old habits die hard.

A frown creased his brow as he continued to sit upright in his bed; what was that dratted sound? He could determine that the rumbling was coming from outside, somewhere in the backyard, and moving around. But what on earth was it? Had it woken Sakura up? He turned his head towards her corner of the bedroom.

"Sakura?"

There was no response, and as he listened carefully, he could not hear any breathing. Perhaps it was the thunderous roar from outside, or maybe it was simply because breathing was so quiet, but he couldn't tell if she was there or not.

"Sakura?" he inquired a little louder, but still received no response.

Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, he tried standing up, holding out his hands for balance. There was a bit of vertigo, but he took a careful step forward, his world steadying slightly as it made fresh contact with the ground. Holding his hand out in front of him, he took careful steps until his hand bumped into a wall, causing him to start slightly. He listened carefully again for signs of breathing, knowing that he was nearer to where Sakura slept. He didn't catch the sound of inhalation or exhalation, but he did hear the clink of dishes coming from the general direction of the kitchen. He took a

few steps sideways, slowly overcoming his dizziness, and poked his head out the door.

"Sakura?" he called louder, and there was an abrupt clatter in response, followed by hurried footsteps.

"Oh! Sasuke, you're awake!" came Sakura's concerned voice, "I was just about to come check on you. You didn't hurt yourself crossing the room did you?"

Shaking his head, he mused quietly over her fretting, but paid no attention to it. "What time is it? And what is that sound?"

"Oh, the genin group that I requested is currently cleaning out the yard and that's Konohamaru operating the lawn mower," Sakura replied offhandedly, "And it's about eleven o'clock in the morning—you looked tired, so I let you sleep in."

"Hn."

"Anyways, do you need any help getting washed up?" she asked him in a cheerful manner, "I've already set out some clean clothes for you in the bathroom."

He shook his head again at her, and offered her his arm, "Just get me to the bathroom and I'll be able to manage."

Giving a small 'mmhm' she took his arm and led him down the hall to the bathroom, Sasuke counting the footsteps as they went. About twelve, he noted to himself as she placed his hand on the doorframe.

"Your clothes are on the right of the sink, closest to the door, and a stack of towels is on the left of the sink, near the shower," she told him, "Oh, and don't leave your dirty clothes and towels on the floor. When you're done, just give me a shout, I'll be in the kitchen."

He nodded once and he heard her turn and leave down the hall, humming a tune quietly to herself. He caught a few notes and

paused a moment, the tune sounded vaguely familiar. Shrugging he entered the bathroom, closing and locking the door behind him. Running his hand on the counter, his hand brushing his clothes, then the towels once he got past the sink. Making a mental note to himself of the room's layout he got undressed and stepped inside the shower, turning on the cold water.

The icy sensation caused his mind to clear instantly, and after a few minutes of standing still, he reached for the hot water tap. He slept better than he had thought he would, having being back in this house; all things considered, he was very surprised that his sleep had been so dreamless. There were so many memories that he had tied back to this house, most of them bad, and those were the ones that stood out the clearest. Sakura had told him that he had appeared tired, and let him sleep in. It was most likely the exhaustion from using so much chakra the previous day that had drained him—whatever the reason, he was thankful for a peaceful night's rest.

After a little while longer, he turned off the water and toweled himself dry; taking the clean clothes that Sakura had set out for him, he dressed quickly, doing as she had recommended, feeling the inside for the tags, to indicate front and back. He was hit by another spell of dizziness when he took his hand off the counter to pull on his shorts, and held his forehead with his hand on the wall until he could balance again. Removing his fingers from his forehead, he thought of the protector that Naruto had returned to him; it was still under his pillow.

He opened the door and listened carefully. He could hear Sakura in the kitchen, talking to somebody—maybe that Konohamaru she had spoken of. No, but the lawn mower was still going outside, so it was most likely one of the other genin that had come to call. The notion brought a small nostalgic smile to his face—he could recall the times when they were given missions such as the one, Naruto complaining loudly while he and Sakura put up with it. He heard Sakura's musical laugh come from the kitchen as more dishes clattered—sounds that indicated she was handling some glasses.

He thought of calling out to her, but then changed his mind—it wasn't far to the bedroom, and he probably wouldn't need her help anyways. As long as he could keep a hand against the wall, and took is slowly, he should be okay. Taking a few tentative steps into the hall, he placed each footfall with care; the hand on the wall slightly in front so that he could tell when he came to the door, instead of falling over like he had at the junction in the hospital.

Crossing the room was a more difficult matter as he found that Sakura had placed a number of objects around her corner of the room—his throbbing toes told him that they were books, heavy books. He couldn't walk along the wall's edge then, he surmised, not if he was going to trip over heavy books and who knew what else.

He released the wall and stood for a moment, his feet braced as the dizziness slowly crept up on him. Taking a step forward he carefully mapped out the room in his mind, placing special emphasis on the books he had knocked his toes on. He took a few more steps and found that if he concentrated, it wasn't too difficult; if he placed a mental image in his head of where things were, opposed to just wondering where they were, then his balanced steadied slightly.

Standing near where he estimated the bed was, he prodded around the floor with his foot, wanting to find the bed with his leg before he bumped into it. Unfortunately, balancing on one foot still was beyond him and he wobbled precariously, and tipped forward. His loud curse word was muffled as he landed face-first into his mattress. He had been able to tell where in the room it was, but he had been unable to reach it without his blindness causing difficulty for him. Scowling, he picked himself up and reached for the forehead protector; after tying it firmly around his head, he decided to take another stab at walking on his own.

As he made his way across the room, he was thankful that there was no one watching, as he found it very humiliating to be cautiously crossing a bare floor, with nothing but the wall and Sakura's books to be worried about tripping over. When he almost repeated the incident of crashing into the doorframe like he had done at the

hospital, he grudgingly decided that he couldn't take any more. He didn't want to call for Sakura—but he would rather be devoid of bruises.

"Sakura," he called loudly out of the doorway and the chattering stopped from the kitchen.

When she arrived, he didn't allow her time to speak as he offered her his arm. Her gentle grasp held onto him securely and he could imagine the slight frown that could be decorating her face at that moment.

"What are you doing all the way over here?" she asked, her voice laced with concern, "You didn't hurt yourself, did you?"

"No."

"Good," she scolded sternly, "I think it's still too early for you to be walking on your own. I mean we'll gradually work at it, but we should practice on your balance first."

"We'll start this afternoon," he told her, giving her a small nudge, indicating that he did not want to continue to stand around.

She gave a small sigh, "If you insist, Sasuke. But we'll wait until the yard's done. I've got something else for you to do in the meantime."

She led him down the hall into the living room, before turning and heading down the side hall that went outside to the backyard. A slight frown marred his face.

"Where are we going?" he asked her as she opened the back door, the whirring of the lawn mower still putting around outside.

"Out back," she replied simply, "It's a nice day outside today and it's stupid to sit around indoors."

Mercifully the noise of the lawn mower stopped as they exited onto the veranda. It felt warm outside, and there was a slight breeze

blowing over the garden, giving the occasional rustle. There were a few birds chirping in the trees, and a clear odor of freshly cut grass hung in the vicinity. Sakura guided him forward and he knew that the edge of the porch was drawing near; he trusted her judgment, but knowing it was there made him a little apprehensive.

"The edge is here," she told him kindly, "Sit."

He complied by dropping to the ground, sitting cross-legged on the wooden flooring.

"There's a pole on your right if you want to lean against that," she said in a voice that made him imagine a smile on her face.

"Sakura-neesan!" came the voice of a young girl from behind, maybe eleven or twelve years old, "Do you need anymore help in the kitchen?"

"lie, Moegi," Sakura's voice was projected back from where they came, "Can you finish up that one flowerbed?"

"Hai!"

Someone energetically rushed by Sasuke as Sakura returned inside; he sat quietly, listening to his surroundings. There was the sound of the feet against grass and then footsteps running across the lawn.

"Konohamaru-kun, are you taking *another* break?" he heard the young girl exclaim in exasperation.

Konohamaru...that was the kid that used to idolize Naruto when they were kids, Sasuke remembered; that's why the name had seemed familiar to him. Heavens knew why he chose Naruto to admire of all people.

"No, I'm done mowing the lawn," came a lazy retort, "I'm just waiting for—"

Footsteps behind him told Sasuke that Sakura had returned and there was a slight clinking that came with her.

"Yippee!" came the voice of Konohamaru, "Lemonade!"

He acted like Naruto too.

Giving a light laugh, Sakura set something down beside him, "Do you want some lemonade, Sasuke-ku—Sasuke."

"Aa," he responded automatically.

His mind had just become preoccupied as he noticed she had corrected herself and dropped the 'kun' suffix. Mentally he frowned, not that it bothered him that she didn't say his name with the annoying suffix, but it was the fact that it had slipped out, that suggested to him that she still regarded him in a way she had before he left Konoha. However when she had corrected herself, a small sense of surprise came to him. He had thought before when she hadn't used the 'kun' suffix, it had meant that she had held something against him, or something had changed between them, and he shrugged it off, knowing that it was most likely to be expected. But she had just corrected herself, which meant that either it was out of habit, or she was trying to avoid saying it for some reason or another.

"Can I have another glass, Sakura-neesan?" the boy, Konohamaru, asked in an exuberant fashion.

"Hey, I haven't even given everyone their first glass," she scolded with a playful tone in her voice, "You can have another one when everyone else has gotten one."

There was the clinking of ice against glass as she poured some more glasses beside him, and nudging his arm, she handed him one. He muttered a quiet, automatic "thank you" and took a sip from the glass while she cheerfully handed out others to the genin group that was crowding around them. He couldn't say that he particularly

liked children—especially loud and obnoxious ones, he added as Konohamaru let out another exuberant exclamation. Once the children had had their fill of lemonade and returned out the yard, he told Sakura so.

"What will you do when you restore the Uchiha clan?" she laughed, sitting down beside him, her legs hanging over the edge of the veranda—he could tell because her feet would occasionally bump the wooden side, "They'll start out as children too."

"They'll be Uchihas," he stated indignantly.

"Oh, and all Uchiha children are quiet and calm?" she teased him, and then there was the jingling of ice as he assumed she took another sip of lemonade.

He grunted in reply and took a sip of his own lemonade, noting that it was made perfectly—it was not too sweet and was a little on the sour side.

"I dunno, Sasuke," she said after a moment, swirling the ice around in her glass so that it tinkled musically, "I wouldn't have called you a quiet and calm child when we were in the academy—that's what made you popular. You were a good student who was nice and talked kindly to everyone; you tried hard at your studies, but you found time to smile and laugh."

A frown descended upon his face. "I don't remember ever being like that," he stated bluntly.

A quiet 'thunk' between them signified that Sakura had put her glass down, "Well, that was before...well, when Itachi—"

"Aa."

He did not want to remember that time.

There was an uncomfortable silence for a moment, Sakura kicking her feet back and forth idly. The genin group was squabbling amongst themselves, arguing over who had to do which task in the garden, and it sounded like the one, Konohamaru, was losing the fight. It was funny how they paralleled Team Seven, but by the sounds of things, the third party of that group was nothing like he had been.

"You know," Sakura pondered serenely, "You smiled a lot back then. That was one of the reasons I liked you—you had a nice smile."

Sasuke did not know what to say to this, so he remained quiet, and took another sip of the lemonade, grabbing an ice cube as he did so. He let it slowly melt in his mouth, the frozen water thawing slowly as time ticked by.

"You laughed back then too," came Sakura's somber voice, "I don't think I've seen you laugh since."

"I laugh," he stated indignantly, the ice cube getting in the way of his tongue and slurring the words slightly.

"I mean really laugh, Sasuke," the projection of her voice turned to face him, "I'm not talking about giving an amused snort once in a while—I mean really laugh, and really smile."

"I haven't had any reason to smile," he said shrugging, the ice cube slightly smaller in his mouth, and not hindering his speech as much.

"I mean, that's understandable, considering what happened to you and everything," she said quietly, her voice turning away from him.

He scowled mentally; they were back on this topic again, and he did not want to speak of it. She didn't know it, but the entrance to the room, where he found his parents dead, was a little ways from here, and the closer they got to discussing the massacre of his clan, the closer the room seemed to feel. It was like a twisted presence that was looming over him, getting closer to him every time he thought

about the deaths of the people he cared most for. He didn't want to have to go into that room if he could help it—he wasn't ready, not yet.

"But you know, you could learn to smile again," Sakura said passively, "I know that you can't ever forget what happened, but that doesn't mean you should let it hang over you all the time. It's just stupid not to smile ever again, over anything."

She sounded slightly uncertain, like she was pondering if the massacre of over a thousand people would be something to make an exception to. It was obvious that she was aware that she couldn't begin to understand.

"It will continue to follow me," he stated coldly, "until the clan is avenged, until Itachi has paid for what he has done; the fall of my clan will always be the first thing in my mind. And until things are put to an end, I have no reason to smile."

She gave a weary sigh, "No offense, Sasuke, but that's stupid. You should smile when you're happy, even if Itachi is out in the world. Would you give him the satisfaction knowing that you gave up enjoying life just because he was alive? You can't tell me that you're constantly thinking of your clan, every minute of the day. There must be some time that you tuck away that thought and focus on other things."

He scowled slightly, ignoring the reason in her words. The ice cube in his mouth was no larger than a sliver on his tongue and it slowly melted away, becoming no more than a trickle of water.

"Don't be annoying."

"As you will, Sasuke," she replied and the sound of movement told him that she was standing up, "Just try to smile a little more. For me? Please?"

He grunted in a way that was neither yes nor no, and held out his empty glass of lemonade for her to take from him. After taking the glass from him, he heard her collect the rest and pick up whatever she had brought them in on. After she departed, he shifted his position so he was leaning against the pole she had notified him about earlier, letting one leg hang over the edge of the veranda as he listened to the genin group hard at work.

Smiling... He shook his head slightly side to side. No matter what Sakura said, he knew that there was no possible way that he could bring himself to smile. The very word seemed strange when mentioned in association with him. Smile for her? He didn't have any reason to smile for her, or for that matter, anyone. Itachi lived, that was reason enough *not* to smile to begin with.

Would you give him the satisfaction knowing you gave up enjoying life just because he was alive?

Who said he wasn't enjoying life? Perhaps a part of him didn't particularly find it thrilling, but that wasn't the point. Even if he wasn't exactly enjoying it, Itachi didn't have to know that it was as a result of him. Sasuke ignored the fact that that probably wasn't Sakura's point. She said to smile when he was happy, but he couldn't be happy when his brother was alive—true happiness had been stolen away by his sibling, and true happiness could only return once Itachi had atoned for the crimes he had committed.

The light footfalls, which he had come to associate with Sakura, returned, and sitting down beside him, she took his hand. Her thumb grazed his knuckles briefly before she turned his hand over, and slapped something down in his hand. He closed his fist over it, feeling its shape. It was an egg shape, and by the feel of things, made of wood, with tiny little grooves or cracks running over it, making the surface a little rough.

"What is this?" he asked her, holding up the object.

"It's a simple three dimensional puzzle," she replied lightly, "It'll be a while before Konohamaru, Moegi, and Udon are finished in the yard, so in the meantime you'll be working with this."

"You want me to assemble a puzzle?" he asked her, his eyebrows raised slightly and a dubious tone in his voice.

"Yeah, basically," she replied cheerfully, "It'll help you be able to do everything from cooking to opening locked doors, dismantling traps and an assortment of other things. If you can assemble even the most complex puzzles by touch, there's hardly any small job you can't do."

She took the puzzle from him and after a brief moment, she returned it in two pieces to his hand. He tossed them lightly in his palm, listening to them clack against one another.

"Two pieces?" he asked her, a little surprised.

"Mm, not as easy as it seems," she replied, a mischievous tone in her voice, and in his mind's eye, he could see a matching expression on her face, "It can fit together in multiple ways, but you'll know that it's right when the two pieces don't have a gap between. Good luck."

And with that, she stood up and went out into the yard, calling the children happily, leaving Sasuke with the simple, yet intricate puzzle to work on. This was going to be a piece of cake.

A/N: (Goes chasing after a thought that she had, but lost.) Oh yeah! In grade nine, an ex-druggie came and spoke to us about what it was like to live the lifestyle she had. I don't remember much about it except that she said that when someone is stabbed, it's the same sound as when someone steps in the mud. That's what the whole 'squish' thing was about. It's kinda creepy, but I wanted it to provoke memories embedded in Itachi's mind and what better way to do it than for him to hear the sound of stabbed people? Okay, now that just sounds creepy. x.x

Chapter 15

A/N: Let's see. I wrote this chapter when I posted chapter five... I'm not sure whether this should be admired or considered pitiful. I'm sure people are wondering if I have a life, and the answer is yes, but I'm generally anti-social and don't go out much :) So writing is basically life. And huzzah for slack semesters when I get homework about once a week:3 (dodges objects that are thrown at her by the student audience)

Chapter Fifteen: Nightmare

Over the next couple weeks, Sakura had worked constantly with Sasuke in adjusting to his blind state, and she was happy to tell Tsunade that he was making excellent progress. It had been a while since she had handed him the first three-dimensional puzzle while the genin cleaned the yard, and now she found that she could give him a number of different puzzles and he'd be able to solve them in minutes. Object recognition had become so easy that it was cut out of the exercises they went through, because it was just wasting time at that point. Ninjutsu practice was getting better since Sakura had found a rocky dell behind the cliff that sported the Great Stone Faces, so that Sasuke was no longer torching things. Also, he had become somewhat accustomed to walking on his own, and while he couldn't walk across the house by himself, he could at least go from their room to the bathroom without Sakura's aid—but he still was fairly loud as he woke her up every time he would get up in the middle of the night.

She found that he had been working himself hard, and every night he would crawl into his bed exhausted. He had taken to just crawling into bed with his clothes on, having been fed up with Sakura throwing the garments at him when he left them on the floor. And even though Sakura was slightly disgusted by the thought of

sleeping in one's dirty clothes, she hadn't complained—even though Inner Sakura still secretly wanted to see Sasuke shirtless again. Apart from Sasuke's personality and pride, which caused the occasional abrasion, there had been no disagreements between them.

Of all the training that they did, Sakura enjoyed the daily walks around town, finding that she could easily ignore the fact that it was rehabilitation, and could simply enjoy spending time with Sasuke. Her descriptions of locations had gotten better and she had come to like describing the world around her, as it put it in a different perspective. Though she and Sasuke didn't tend to have long drawn out conversations on their walks—unless it was over something important, and usually disheartening—she learned a few things about him through the small chitchat that they could keep going between them. For instance, apart from Sasuke having a taste for tomatoes, he also disliked dampness, the smell of the hospital and loathed Kabuto, the medic ninja who worked under Orochimaru.

"What did you do for those three years when you were with Orochimaru?" she had asked him once.

He had shrugged and gave a simple reply, "He taught me many things with all three types of jutsus, mostly in ninjutsu. Half of them are forbidden due to chakra consumption and a quarter of the forbidden ones require eyesight in order to maintain them without causing harm to the user."

She had asked him a few more things, but he had refused to give any extended responses, and the matter was dropped. He either didn't want to respond, or he simply could not remember parts of the time he had spent in the Village of Sound.

People tended to visit, Naruto being the most frequent caller, along with Hinata, whom he had taken a more curious interest in since the lectures he and Lee had given Sakura. He was still trying to work out how the young Hyuuga felt about him, while Hinata was blushing so often that it seemed that it seemed like her permanent skin tone.

Sakura just shook her head at the couple, astounded by Naruto's stupidity and inability to comprehend Hinata's shyness.

Kanaye had been unable to visit because he was out on another long-term mission in some foreign country and wasn't due back until towards the end of June, while Sakura's mother had come over after the first week of them living together so that she could 'introduce herself'. Sakura knew that she just wanted to analyze Sasuke and see what kind of person he was; she had drawn the same conclusion as Kanaye: 'why do you like this guy again?' As for Sakura's father, he was still away on a mission.

Sasuke seemed to be taking it all neutrally, but Sakura supposed that was his way of taking it in a good light. No matter how he was taking it, it was better than him treating all of them coldly.

He seemed oblivious to his progress rate, and seemed to have this notion that he was either not making good time, or he wasn't working hard enough; Sakura couldn't decide which. She didn't like how he was pushing himself to his limits, afraid that he would inadvertently hurt himself if he got too overconfident. That was why she was somewhat glad when she woke up one morning to find that it was raining heavily.

She had just finished putting lunch on the table, having let Sasuke sleep late again due to the bad weather, and looked up in time to see him attempting to walk across the living room. She quickly leapt over the table and stopped him before he crashed into the wall, which was mere feet from the direction he was going. The hallway was no problem for him, as he could reach for the wall, and the bedroom was familiar to him, but he still had difficulty crossing larger rooms.

"Hey, remember what I said about crossing the living room?" she scolded him, having pulled back on his arm, so that he almost lost his balance and fell into her anyways.

"Yes," he replied irritably, "What time is it?"

"It's twelve, noon," she replied curtly, then continued her reprimands, "I don't want you pushing yourself, you hear me? You're making good progress, better than anyone else would be able to in your place, so you don't need to overwork yourself."

"You let me sleep in?" he asked her, raising an eyebrow, then frowned slightly.

"Listen," she told him quietly and there was a short pause.

"It's raining," he said after a moment, hearing the quiet pattering on the roof and outside.

"Exactly," she told him, leading him over to the kitchen, "Everything that I thought we could do today was just negated by a change in weather."

She seated him down at the table, where he found the chopsticks she had set out for him. Seating him in a certain spot and putting his chopsticks in the right place on the table made it easier for him to find things around him.

"So what are we going to do now?" he asked her, prodding at his food, a method he had developed in order to discover what she had made, "And what did you make for lunch?"

"I was thinking we could maybe get you to work on the familiarity of the house. I mean you can get from our room to the bathroom and back, but I can tell that you don't like having to be helped everywhere else. Seeing as you've lived here for a majority of your life, it shouldn't be too difficult," she replied, sitting down opposite him, and resting her chin placidly in her palm, gazing across the table at Sasuke.

"I see," he replied evenly, "Lunch?"

"Guess," she challenged, a smile coming to her lips

"It's a soup," he told her, stirring the contents with the chopsticks, "Smells like miso."

Tentatively, he picked up one of the pieces floating in the soup, inserting it into his mouth.

"Tastes like miso," he said after he had swallowed the piece.

"If it looks like a duck, sounds like a duck, and walks like a duck," Sakura mused cheerfully, her eyes sparkling, "Then it must be a duck, right?"

He gave a crooked smile from across the table and continued to eat the soup.

"Almost had a smile there," she told him, standing up and pouring herself a cup of tea that she had made to go with lunch.

It was something that she said to him on occasion, so he treated it with the usual neutral grunt for a response, generally ignoring the statement.

"Sakura."

"Mmm-hmm?" she set the pot aside and put the mug on the table, about to sit down.

"Someone is banging loudly on the back door," Sasuke informed her unconcernedly, before sticking a piece of barbecued pork into his mouth.

A confused look crossed her face as she straightened up again, walking around the table and to the hall, "Strange, who would be out in this weather...?"

"SAKURA-CHAN!" came a loud bellowing noise from on the other side of the door.

Of course; who else but Naruto would be crazy enough to go outside in such terrible weather? Knowing him, he probably wasn't even wearing a jacket or anything to keep him warm. She opened the door and discovered that she was right; he had just worn his usual orange and black jumpsuit and had no umbrella. To top it all off, he came inside even before Sakura could even utter a greeting.

"Why don't you come in?" Sakura asked him sarcastically, closing the door behind her as he shook his head like a wet dog.

"Eh?" Naruto peered at her in a confused manner, "Sakura-chan, I'm already inside. Are you feeling well? Is Sasuke putting too much stress on you?"

Sakura blinked at him in a manner that clearly portrayed that she thought he lacked intelligence; meanwhile Inner Sakura was bonking Naruto over the head for being such an utter moron.

"No, I'm fine," she said with a small sigh, "Here, let me take your hoodie; it's soaked."

He removed the sweatshirt from his back and Sakura took it from him, motioning for him to follow as she headed back to the kitchen, thinking of a couple places she could hang the garment to dry.

"Actually, there's a hole in it near the bottom, on the left," Naruto said sheepishly as they entered through the kitchen, "I was wondering if you could fix it."

"Sure, I should have time today," she said offhandedly, "Sit down, I'll get you some tea."

"Naruto," Sasuke greeted evenly as the young man took a seat next to his old rival.

"Ohayo, Sasuke," Naruto grinned—seeming to forget that it was actually the afternoon—before turning back to Sakura, "Sakura-chan, could I have some miso soup too?"

"Fine, fine," she said in resignation, a small smile on her face.

Over the years, Sakura had come to notice that they when Sasuke and Naruto weren't at each other's throats, arguing, they could actually be quite pleasant to listen to, not having a single insult thrown in or any name calling. It was moments like these that she felt that they were truly Team Seven.

"You must have some reason for coming to this part of the village in the rain," she told him, setting down a mug of tea and some miso soup as well, "Why are you here?"

Wrapping her hands around her own mug as she sat down, she peered patiently over at Naruto, who was slurping up the soup in such a revolting manner. He stopped only long enough to give his answer before beginning to eat in an unsightly style once more.

"I have a letter from Tsunade-obaachan for you," Naruto told her, the soup apparently distracting him.

"A letter?"

Naruto set his chopsticks down and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before reaching for the letter in his pants pocket; Sakura was glad to note that he used the hand that he hadn't wiped his mouth with. Withdrawing it, he handed it across the table to her. Sasuke turned his head up to face her as she opened the yellow envelope.

"It's a really scary letter, just so you know," Naruto said with a shudder.

"You read it?" Sasuke raised his eyebrows slightly in disbelief at Naruto.

"Well, I just wanted to know what it was about, but the beginning was too unnerving for me to get to the end," Naruto replied, fidgeting nervously with his chopsticks.

Frowning a little, Sakura withdrew the white folded papers from with in and after unfurling it, she laughed out loud.

NARUTO! PUT THIS LETTER BACK IN THE ENVELOPE RIGHT NOW

After reading the bolded and capitalized statement aloud so that Sasuke could find out what was so funny, a smirk passed over the Uchiha's face; Sakura turned back to Naruto, a twinkle in her eye.

"You certainly have a reputation," she told him with a grin, before turning back to read the letter, skipping over the loud message written at the top. As her eyes scanned the words, she ignored the background noise that Naruto had produced.

("Oi, why aren't you wearing your forehead protector?" Naruto pestered, noticing that Sasuke's forehead was indeed void of the protector.

"I haven't put it on yet," came Sasuke's even reply, "Dobe."

"Hey!" Naruto cried indignantly.)

The bickering was tuned out after that.

Sakura,

My apologies for the bolded line above, but I wouldn't put it past Naruto to try and read the letter to find out what it is. You and I both know how he is.

Anyways, I am writing this letter to inform you of Sasuke's punishment in regard to his crimes against the village. As you are no doubt aware, he has been questioned three times since his return to Konoha and after discussing it thoroughly with the village council, we have come to an understanding that he has given us as much information as he is able. However, even though he has been of utmost help in providing us with knowledge of the Sound Village,

there has been a collective agreement that that alone isn't enough to pardon him entirely. I tried my best, under the circumstances, to get him cleared—without abusing my position of Hokage.

It has been decided that his punishment will be reduced to a number of hours of community service. Do not be deceived by the word 'hours', as the time he must serve is three months—just over two thousand hours.

However, knowing what I do about Sasuke, he will not be eager to do hours of community services in the way of doing odd jobs about town, so I took into consideration about the request Sasuke put forth to you, in remaining a shinobi. Knowing that would take a couple months longer than regular rehabilitation, I have decided to permit you to honor his request and continue to stay with him. If there is any controversy or complaints, tell me and I shall have it straightened out. The reason I am allowing you to assist Sasuke in staying a ninja, is so that he may work off his hours in the form of missions. I expect you to train him well, Sakura.

Good luck with rehab, and work hard. You haven't wasted your time training with me—remember that.

Fifth Hokage of Konohagakure, the Village Hidden in the Leaves,

Tsunade

P.S. I expect periodic updates on your progress.

"Well?" Sasuke asked, as she folded the letter up, placing it back in the envelope.

"What did it say, Sakura-chan?" Naruto asked, blinking at her curiously.

Sakura gave a semi-sigh, not sure whether this was good news or bad. Sasuke had gotten off the hook, but on the other hand, shoved with three months service time. Wondering how she should put it,

Sasuke tapped the table slightly with his fingers—a sign that he was getting somewhat impatient.

"Well, Sasuke," she started, still somewhat thrown off by the letter's contents, "Your sentence has been lightened considerably—however..."

"However...?" he raised an eyebrow slightly.

"Your sentence has been reduced from death, to community service," Sakura said calmly, "Three months worth."

"Nani?!" Naruto exclaimed, bursting out laughing " *Sasuke* doing community service?!"

After casting a trademark glare in Naruto's general direction, Sasuke turned to Sakura, "Didn't they find my information helpful?"

"Yes, but the council decided collectively that it wasn't enough to give you a full pardon," Sakura sighed; she herself had hoped that what he had given them would be able to get him off the hook, "However, Tsunade-sama is says that you can work off the hours in the form of missions for the village, which means that she is permitting me to stay longer, until you are fully trained again."

"Good," he stated in response, taking up a spoon for his miso stew.

"NANI?!" Naruto exclaimed, sobering from his peals of laughter, "You're staying here *longer* ?!"

"Naruto, please," Sakura said frowning at him in a disapproving manner, "If this was a novel, I can see almost everything that comes out of your mouth ending in a question mark followed by an exclamation mark."

"The Hokage is permitting you to stay?" Sasuke said after a moment, "You told me that I was the one who decided when you left."

There was another explosion of protest from Naruto, which both Sakura and Sasuke ignored.

"Yes, well. Tsunade-sama has the power to pull the plug on any projects; however she approves this one, and therefore the power falls to you," she explained passively, pouring some more tea into her mug, "Personally, I think it should be your choice, so even if she told me to leave, I wouldn't."

"Aa."

"Sakura-chan," Naruto moped in a desperate manner, "Have you no decency?"

"Naruto," she countered in a sharp retort, "Have you no manners?"

Sakura grinned in satisfaction as the fox-faced boy shut his mouth; Sasuke smirked faintly as he ate his soup.

The rain was pelting hard on the veranda as Sasuke walked next to Sakura, moving to another part of the Uchiha household. Sakura was making him examine each room closely, until he knew the location of furniture to the exact millimeter, and then promptly threw him into a new location, one in which he then had to get used to as well. He had grown a little apprehensive as he realized which direction they were currently headed; they had gone through almost all the rooms already, and there were few left to visit.

Sakura stopped before a door to a new room and a cold dread filled Sasuke's stomach as he realized where they had stopped—he knew they would stop here, but he had been inwardly hoping that this room would go overlooked, bypassed and unnoticed by his pink-haired companion.

The old door groaned loudly as Sakura opened it, a musty smell emitting from within. It was the smell of dank, dust and disinfectant—the third failing at hiding the other two. A presence seemed to come

from the room which Sakura beckoned for him to enter, something foreboding and forbidden, and he could see in his mind's eye the darkness that was beyond the opening, longing to swallow him like a large gaping maw. He felt his body tense up from head to toe, and the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. Even though he had been living in the house with Sakura for two weeks, he hadn't yet set foot in this room, and had avoided doing so at all costs. Yet now it seemed inevitable, and he would be forced to enter the room that held such horrible memories.

"Sasuke?"

Her tone was questioning. He didn't blame her. It was a regular room, completely normal, how could she have the same connotations towards it as he did? He moved one foot about six inches forward, but then stopped, his feet seeming glued to the ground through some unnatural force. There was a discomfoting pause—a silence that seemed to emit from the very room before him, threatening to devour them.

"...You don't have to go in here if you want," she said quietly after a moment, and he started slightly at the comment.

"I'll go in," he told her firmly, taking another step forward.

He hated himself at that moment for being afraid. When was the last time Uchiha Sasuke had been afraid? A long time ago, and it wasn't of an empty room. He forced his legs to move against their will and enter the old room. There had been light fixtures in the ceiling, but in his mind, they were turned off, the room dark just like the time when he opened it to smell the stench of bloodshed.

Sakura had dropped his arm, and he secretly wished she hadn't—he felt isolated now, vulnerable. Automatically his right hand traveled to his left shoulder; he did not lay his hand on the curse mark, but instead on a streak of scar tissue that ran across his shoulder. Itachi's shuriken had sliced him there, when he was eight years old.

Almost nine had passed since then, yet he could still feel the sting of the wound as clearly as if it were open at that very moment.

The palms of his hand became moist, and this throat constricted oddly, his body stiffening up again. There had been blood... He had seen it as he lay on the floor sobbing, the red liquid trickling down along a crack between floorboards—it was his parents' blood. His left hand was clenched into a fist, and his right one was squeezing his shoulder so hard that it felt like his collarbone would break under the pressure. He felt nauseated—sick; the memories washed over him so heavily that he could see the events replaying right before his eyes.

"Why?" he murmured so quietly that only he could hear himself,
"How?"

Just to see if I could do it.

"Sasuke!"

He was harshly jolted back to reality as Sakura called out to him. He had completely forgotten about her presence, and now that she had spoken his name, the memories seemed to fade back into the past instead of the present. He extended his hand out to the direction of her voice, and she grabbed onto it immediately, running her thumb over the back in a reassuring way. He held it tighter than necessary and focused his attention on it, but the memories refused to leave his mind.

"Let's not stay here," she told him after a moment, and she tugged on his hand suggestively, but he did not move, "Come Sasuke."

Giving a sharp pull, she took him from the room, closing the door firmly behind them. The threatening atmosphere that engulfed him was instantly dispelled as the door banged shut, and his limbs relaxed again, his throat loosening up. The feeling of sickness passed, and in the ensuing silence, he could hear the falling rain. It was then he realized that his hand was still clasping his shoulder,

and he knew that it was probably badly bruised. Motioning for Sakura to take him elsewhere, neither of them said anything—she probably didn't even know what was wrong with him. Little did Sasuke know that as soon as Sakura had flicked on the lights to the room, she had seen the dark bloodstains smeared on the wooden floor.

After leaving the room where his parents had been murdered, Sasuke put the event aside, firmly ignoring it. He had regained his regular temperament and Sakura didn't ask him about it, knowing that if he wanted to share, he would. However because he did not want to share, both acted as if nothing had happened.

He was now currently walking slowly across the living room, trying hard to remember where everything was; he had been in this room less than half an hour ago, painting a mental picture in his head of where everything was. Now as they came back to the living room, he struggled to recall the mental map he had written not too long ago—everything was there, but the proportions skewed; was the table more to the left? Or the right?

He found out it was a little more to the right than he remembered as he stubbed his toe on the table leg. Repressing his less than gentlemanly curse words, he took a slight step to the right, a little irritated that Sakura was refusing to help him on his second round through the rooms. Carefully, he took a couple of steps forward, then prodded forward with his one foot, tentatively testing for the couch's structure, an uncertain distance away from him. He couldn't sense it, so he took another step towards the wall. This time, his foot collided almost immediately with it, and he stumbled, falling forward into the upholstered piece of furniture.

Sakura came up behind him as he pushed himself up from the cushions and into a sitting position, scowling irritably. He heard a quiet giggle, which irritated him further, but he could never bring himself to be angry with her for subtle things like that. He just settled himself comfortably, quietly brooding over his injured toes and

bruised knees as he painfully discovered where some hidden piece of furniture resided—that often occurred as he grew overconfident, moving too quickly for Sakura to warn him in time.

He supposed it was because he knew this house; things should have remained untouched since he left and stopped living there. Even though things had remained where they were, he had grown, and the distances between places were smaller and quicker to get to than he remembered. He was no longer his twelve-year-old self, but rather a man with significantly longer legs. He was taller, so the ceiling was lower than he remembered, and all the windowsills weren't nearly as high off the ground. But even if things like that had changed, there were some rooms that he knew would never change, the room where his parents had been murdered standing out clear in his mind.

The cushion next to him sank down under Sakura's weight, and a damp...thing—a cloth or article of clothing—brushed his right side. Violently pushing aside his dark thoughts, he listened to her fidget on the spot for a moment, as he tried to figure out what she was doing.

"What are you doing?" he asked, giving up, his mind feeling worn out from having to do so much guesswork already, a nice distraction from bleak contemplations.

"I'm mending Naruto's hoodie," she replied in a serene—no, not entirely—peaceful manner, "He always pushes himself to the point where he's exhausted, and his clothes are a little worse for wear."

"You are a skilled woman, Sakura," Sasuke told her after a minute, "You are a ninja and a medic who can mend, cook, work with rehabilitation, and you are good with children."

He heard her movement pause, and when she spoke, her voice was turned towards him. "I suppose I am," a shift in the couch's cushions suggested that she had shrugged, "I never really thought about it."

"What else?" he found himself asking, for no particular reason—something he normally wouldn't have done if it had been anybody

else.

"What else what?" she replied in confusion.

"What else do you do?" she was different now, it had only taken the first day when she let him topple into that damned flowerbed that he realized that.

She paused for a moment, "Well, I can garden, and I have a intermediate grasp on music. But I learned that in kunoichi training, along with the mending and cooking. As for children, I just like them I suppose—to some extent."

"I see."

As a silence fell between them, he closed his eyes and eased back into to the couch, listening to the rain, which was pounding steadily on the roof, creating a rhythmic pattern. He rested his arm against his forehead, trying to listen harder—he could hear Sakura moving, her movement rhythmic as well, as she sewed Naruto's shirt. He wondered absently whether it was the same trademark orange, or if he had changed his style. Concentrating harder, he searched for the smallest changes in sound, the slightest ripple that would disturb the air. He could hear the creak of the house as the wind blew lightly outside; something, perhaps a tree branch, scratching the side of the house gently; and if he listened hard enough, he could even catch the subtleness of Sakura's breathing.

"Sasuke," her voice seemed unnaturally loud in comparison to her soft breaths, "I've been meaning to ask you something for a while..."

He tensed slightly, was she going to ask about his reaction when they had entered the room earlier?

"Hn?" a short, one-syllable reply, something that was helpful in concealing his emotions.

"At the very end of the hallway, where the bedroom is, there's a seal on the last room," she said quietly, in a timid sort of way. She always used that tone of voice when she knew she was going to perhaps touch on something sensitive, like the death of his clan, or Itachi. Sasuke was glad that in this case it was the latter.

"What of it?" he asked, just managing to keep the snap out of his question. Despite the fact that it was not about that room he avoided so much, he was again reminded of something related to the topic.

"I was wondering why it's there," she continued, not stopping in her sewing, "I didn't go in there when I cleaned the house, because I knew you probably had a reason—just so you know."

She knew him. She knew that he would demand if she disturbed or touched anything, or entered that room, so she answered before being asked. Was he really that predictable? As for the room, he didn't want to answer, but found no reason not to. Why should he tell her? Why shouldn't he? He never wanted to have that room open again, but half of him knew that it would have to be dealt with eventually.

"It was Itachi's bedroom," he said after a moment.

"Oh," it was a quiet response, not much louder than her breathing had been.

"It's ransacked," he stated before Sakura could ask any more questions, "And hasn't been opened since I placed the seal nine years ago."

"It should be cleaned out," she said after a moment's pause.

He scowled and lowered his arm from his head, glaring in her general direction. Sakura didn't shift from her spot at his action—she didn't flinch at his glares like she had when they were younger; either it was because he could no longer meet her gaze, or he was losing his touch. Either way, it annoyed him.

"That room is no longer part of this house," he stated stubbornly, once again resentful that Sakura couldn't understand, "To open it would to make it part of it again."

"Sasuke, if you don't want that room in this house, then hire some renovators to get rid of it," she stated patiently, "It's on the corner of the house, and I'm sure a flowerbed could be installed in the space created outside. Or adjoin it to another room, so that it becomes a new room. Right now it's just a waste of perfectly good space, and I imagine that you can afford to have renovations done."

This was true. Being the only survivor of his clan, he had inherited all the money of the Uchihis. Families of those who had relatives that had married into the Uchiha clan got money from their deceased kin, but the money from anyone who had borne the Uchiha name for generations was given to Sasuke—the last living Uchiha, who had had parents that both had the name of Uchiha before marriage. Needless to say, he was not penniless; while he had donated about a half of it to the village, out of simple psychological rejection of the money, there was still a sizable sum left over. He would have kept even less, if the Third Hokage hadn't refused any more than half. Money awarded from missions had also added up over time, and there was interest to take into consideration. But even though he could afford the renovations...

"I don't want that room opened," he emphasized again.

The rational part of his mind was telling him to listen to her, to be sensible. It was a waste of space, as she had said, but the part of his mind that was passionate about his hatred for Itachi was dominant at the moment, and reason was shunted to the side, ignored. Maybe it was because she could sense that he was angry, or maybe because she felt that he needed some sort of condolence, but Sakura laid her mending aside and grasped his hand in hers, running her thumb over his knuckles tenderly. Sasuke did nothing; Sakura didn't say anything. It was one of those rare times that he would let her touch him with no complaints uttered, no questions asked, just a poignant silence and a trace of understanding in the air.

A loud shout pierced the peaceful slumber that Sakura had been experiencing, her beautiful dreams cut away in an instant. Sitting up sharply, she cursed herself for falling asleep when she was on her breaks at the hospital; she needed to be ready at an instant, and couldn't afford to sleep—someone's life could be on the line! Tsunade would probably give her a lecture once she...

It was dark around her, save for some faded light spilling in through the window on her left; she blinked in disorientation, when another shout—a curse word, followed by some muttering—caught her attention. She wasn't in the hospital, she remembered, berating herself; she was in Sasuke's house, and asleep on the futon that sat in the empty corner of his room. How long had she been sleeping here? Just over two weeks already; one would think she would be used to it by... Her eyes widened in concern; the cry that had woken her had come from Sasuke. Sharply she looked over at Sasuke's form, scrambling out of her makeshift bed and shrugging her bathrobe. She hurried to his side, not bothering to tie the sash.

"Sasuke?" she murmured quietly, laying a hand tentatively on his shoulder.

He rolled over, and curled up in a ball on the bed, his form trembling visibly—Sakura shook his shoulder slightly, trying to wake him from his slumber, but to no avail. Shaking his head side to side in his troubled dreams, he was uttering a long stream of words, too quietly for her to catch. His fingers clutched at the sheets, as he flinched visibly like he was in pain, and then continued to mutter.

Nightmares. She realized with sudden revelation that he was not hurt or suffering like she had originally thought, but something in the corner of his mind had been brought up for review in his sleep, and now he was quietly murmuring incoherent words into his mattress. She bit her lip as he gave another sudden flinch in his sleep; what should she do? Should she wake him? No, he would be angry with her, and embarrassed by the fact his nightmares woke her. Should

she leave him and go back to sleep? That wasn't an option either; she couldn't just leave him like this...

He gave another shudder and this time grasped his shoulder in a wounded manner, another shout coming from his sleeping form.

' *The curse mark...?* ' she wondered dimly. No—it was too low down for that, he had been clutching it earlier when they were in that one room. The room that had blood stained on the floor—where Sasuke's parents had taken their last breaths. Horror washed over her as she gained a small insight into what plagued his sleep.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, she was overcome by a protective intuition, her heart throbbed painfully as she watched him suffer. She wrapped her arm around him, propping him up a little so that when she held his trembling form, his head resting on her shoulder, his forehead against her neck. Surprise took her as he suddenly wrapped his arms around her waist in an almost instinctive manner, like she was the only escape from the mental torture he was going through.

He quivered so violently in her arms, but was no longer muttering, but a frightened shake of the head told her that her embrace wasn't enough. He needed more reassurance, something that he knew well...something that could touch his subconscious and sooth him. Sakura wracked her mind for possibilities; she and Sasuke had never shared anything intimate, there was nothing that she could think of that would remind him of her, telling him that she was there for him. Perhaps there was something from his childhood...the lullaby she had come across in the closet—the one his mother had written for him.

After tracing the faded piece of sheet music in her head, she began to hum the first few bars, the notes becoming clearer as she continued the song. His grip on her tightened as she hummed, but she didn't mind, merely returning the strong embrace as well, hoping that her humming would reach him somehow.

In the dim light that was spilling in from outside, she could see his face, marred with the look of fright. Then after a moment, his obsidian irises appeared as he half-opened his eyes, the fearful and confused expression not changing. His gaze was vacant and delirious, staring blankly forward, not able to see anything—Sakura felt her heart go out to him as the trembling continued, but she did not break the song. What would it be like, she asked herself, to wake from a nightmare and still wonder with horror if you're still dreaming?

"K...Kaa-san?" she heard him whisper shakily, clinging to her slender frame.

Her heart broke. Tears welled up in her eyes and she pulled him closer still, if that was possible. She took a shallow breath and was barely able to choke back a despairing sob.

"lie," she replied—distraught—yet managing to just keep the tremble out of her voice as she rested her cheek on the top his head. She refused to let the tears fall as she gently corrected him, "Sakura-chan."

"Sa-kura...?" he murmured softly and brokenly, his eyes slowly sliding shut again.

The grip he held on her did not slacken as he fell still again, his body's trembling abating and his breathing falling into a regular pattern. Laying a hand on his head, she cradled him gently, allowing the tears to finally break free from her eyelids and slide over her face. She had always taken her mother's tender embrace for granted, but as she sat now with Sasuke asleep in her arms, his head on her shoulder, and his arms wrapped securely around her like a frightened child, she wondered... She wondered what it must have been like for him.

Through the biggest nightmare of his life, the one person who he could seek comfort and shelter from he found dead at his brother's feet.

A/N: Oh, I've been meaning to mention this, but I kept forgetting: I did not make Kanaye and Itachi the same age on purpose. I selected Kanaye's age before I found out what age Itachi was. After I found out, I was like: whoa, that's a really creepy coincidence.

Anyways, please review!

Chapter 16

A/N: I have nothing to say here today. Read at your leisure. :p

Chapter Sixteen: The Dawn and the Dusk

A quiet, and rhythmic thudding filled Sasuke's ears as he slowly came to wakefulness, the lulling sound slowly easing into his consciousness. He became aware of a warmth that was present, and as his mind gradually became alert, he discovered his arms were wrapped around something, or more rather, someone. His head was resting on someone's shoulder, arms encircling a slender waist, and as he lay there quietly, he felt the rise and fall that came with breathing. Arms enfolded him as well, holding him gently, a cheek resting softly on his head.

' *Sakura...* ' his mind registered hazily, a memory of the night flickering slightly in his head.

From the position they were in, he knew that she was leaning against the wall, having slid downwards over the night. Fabric that was both thick and warm was against his skin, and then his lower body felt the sheets. It seemed that she was sitting on top of his bed, not having any blankets or pillows for herself, nothing to keep her warm except for the thick fabric—a robe, he determined. Shifting his position slightly, he heard her stir from her slumber.

"Sasuke?" came her faint utterance.

He dropped his grasp from her, and pulling away he sat up slightly his face turned towards her, listening carefully. Beside him, Sakura shuffled so that her weight indicated she was sitting up straighter. There was a silence, and Sasuke had didn't know what to say. There was nothing *to* say; he did not need to ask her why she was there,

he knew why he had found her sitting on his bed that morning, though he would not say a word about it.

As he expected from her, she said nothing either, seeming both at a loss for words and not needing to say anything to him. He could feel her gaze on him, seeming neither hostile nor embarrassed, feeling steady and deep, yet calm and peaceful. She was expecting him to say something, but he did not.

"You were having nightmares," she said tenderly and softly after the silence had drawn out considerably.

He gave a noncommittal grunt; he remembered them clearly, he did not need to be told that. Images still swirled mercilessly around in his mind, caught up in his conscious like leaves skittering in a wispy breeze, trapped and unable to settle away quietly again. It was an old recurring nightmare, one that had haunted him over and over since the slaughter of his clan. It had continuously come to him while he stayed in this house, and it was only after he moved out into his own apartment that they had stopped. He hadn't been in this house since then, and that was why he had not been so eager to return.

As a child, he had found out that if he trained to the point of exhaustion, he would not dream, too tired to even bring up that which plagued him. That was what he had done over the past few weeks since he and Sakura began living in the old house, and it had worked, his nightmares had not returned; however she had let him sleep late the previous night, and the activities they had done were far from strenuous. And that night the nightmare had returned.

Again he had found himself in that room, the room in which his parents were found dead, Itachi's daunting form looming over the slashed corpses with that indifferent expression on his face. Again and again the murder of his parents then played in his head, a permanent consequence of suffering under the Mangekyou Sharingan. And as he continuously begged his brother to stop, out of nowhere he remembered hearing music: humming.

"Where did you learn that song?" he asked her after a moment, turning away from her, sitting a sizable distance from her.

"I found it," Sakura replied quietly, "in an old box in the closet. It was labeled 'music'; there was sheet music inside, written by your mother. There was an assortment of different melodies—that was song included, among others. I told you yesterday that I had an intermediate grasp on music."

Sasuke was quiet for a moment. Songs his mother had written? She had always liked to sing, and was always humming a tune whenever she was working. He recalled no such box, but then again, he had simply shelved his parents' things after their deaths; having to deal with their belongings was too painful for him at the time.

"She used to hum that song to me," he stated after a moment, saying it more to himself than Sakura.

"I hoped that song would soothe you out of your nightmare—it seemed pretty bad," she said kindheartedly.

He closed his eyes for a second; soothe him? He remembered waking to Sakura's humming, thinking for a moment that it had been his mother there with him—maybe somehow it had all been a terrible dream and they were alive, and he had imagined the whole Uchiha clan downfall.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Sakura asked him compassionately, her voice filled with concern.

He scowled and scooted slightly away from her, lengthening the distance between them. "Don't worry about me," he told her gruffly; he would be fine without her.

Now that the first of the nightmares appeared, his childhood method had begun to fail, and it came to a point where no matter how hard he worked at the activities he was given, the nightmares didn't abate,

but instead seemed worse than before. Not only did his clan's massacre flit across his mind, but also scenes of the horrors he had watched while under Orochimaru slipped in among them. Things that he tried to ignore, things that he had done for power, trying to convince himself that there was some justice to his deeds as long as he benefited from it.

Despite the fact that he had told Sakura not to fret over his nightmares, it became a regular occurrence to wake up with her holding him protectively in her arms. He would find his head lying on her shoulder, his forehead against her neck, the pulsing of her jugular veins only enhancing the sound of her heartbeat. Other times he found woke with his head in her lap, one hand holding his head supportively, and the other lying comfortably on his shoulder. And twice he had woken to find her lying on top of his bed, next to him, with his arms securely fastened around her waist. When they both would wake, neither would say anything, but rather would get up silently and get ready for the coming day as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

It was another one of those mornings that he woke with his head on her shoulder, and as he released his tight grasp on her, he heard her shift as well. When she was awake, he waited patiently for her to stand so that he could pull back the covers of the bed, and as she stood up to stretch, he heard her joints cracking.

"You shouldn't sleep like that," he told her neutrally, and he heard her pause to stare at him, "It's bad for your back."

"Oh, probably," she replied noncommittally, "but if you're able to get a better night's rest out of it, I don't mind."

"You're losing sleep," he told her flatly, standing up from the bed, "Don't worry about me."

It was true that he was able to sleep better when she came and dispelled his nightmares, but he did not want her to continue to sacrifice herself. If she were tired then it would encumber her

daytime tasks, and slow his training down. He would not have his own strength hindered by allowing her skill to slip.

"What if we came up with a compromise?" she asked after a moment's consideration.

"How?" he demanded, a displeased frown crossing his brow.

Both of them could think of the answer to that question, and neither voiced it. As things stood, they were already walking the line of decency, and the only compromise either could think of would be crossing that line to where neither of them wanted to go.

"Just forget it," he told her firmly, glowering in her direction, "I'll be fine."

He had put a note of finality in his voice and walked over to the closet to emphasize that the matter was closed. As he felt around inside his half of the closet, Sakura stayed standing silently where he had left her, and it was only after he had collected a set of clean clothes and proceeded to the shower that she let out a small sigh and moved towards the closet herself.

She was so altruistic sometimes, something that never ceased to amaze him—something that made him feel undeserving, but he put that thought aside. As selfish as it was, he had to kill Itachi, no matter what happened, or what obstacles he came across. It was his goal, and nothing could come before that.

Sakura shuffled past him as he exited the bathroom twenty minutes later and unhurriedly he made his way to the kitchen. Knowing that sometimes she could take forever, he wandered around the house, practicing his exploration skills. It had been a just over a week since they had started walking around the house, allowing him to layout the rooms in his mind, mentally judging where the furniture and walls were in relation to him, and how far it was to get there. The dizziness was as good as gone, only if he moved too quickly or halted abruptly would it come to him. It was a vast improvement, Sakura had told

him, considering the fact that he had been blind for only a month and he was picking up on it so quickly.

He stopped in the kitchen, and could see the room almost clearly in his mind. The low table with the cushions around it, the counters, the cupboards, sink, refrigerator; with each object he listed, he could feel their textures tingle in his palms at the memory of touching each one, remembering them. He took a few steps into the kitchen and stood for a minute; Sakura would be a while longer, and he did not like standing idle in the kitchen, it felt like he was wasting time.

Sasuke walked over to the kitchen counter and laid his hand on the cool, smooth surface, feeling the texture under his fingertips. If he could do something now to save time, then they could get more training done that day. He reached up and felt the old cupboard door, his childhood memories matching a picture to the grain of the wood running up and down the wooden slab. Sakura most likely hadn't moved any of the dishes around when she washed them, to prevent from confusing him when she left; his mother had always kept plates and the like three cupboards down from the end, he recalled. He walked along the counter with one hand on the wood, and when he reached the end, he backtracked three and opened the door.

He reached inside tentatively and when his fingers brushed a stack of clean plates, he knew that nothing had been moved. After taking one out and setting it on the counter, he reached up a shelf higher and took out two smaller plates. The glasses and mugs were kept two cupboards left of this one, he recalled, and soon two tea mugs joined the plates that were laid on the counter.

Pausing to listen for a moment, he could barely catch the sound of quietly running water. Sasuke grumbled in slight impatience; Sakura was still in the shower. Ever since she had mentioned yesterday that they would be starting working on basic taijutsu training that day, he had been anticipating it. Practicing ninjutsu was all well and good, but a ninja could not implement those skills effectively in a fight without having his taijutsu available to get him out of a tight spot if

need be. However, training couldn't begin if they still had breakfast to be made and eaten.

He turned to face the fridge; he didn't trust himself enough to attempt making the tea, but he knew that there was left over steamed rice from dinner, and maybe he could make rice balls. After living alone for half his life, rice balls were one of the few things that he could make. He had made so many of them that even when he was twelve he would have sworn he could have made them with his eyes shut. Well, he'd soon find out if he could.

After a few minutes of opening various containers in the fridge, he finally found a square tupperware container that contained the rice. In his raiding of the refrigerator, he had also come across some seaweed she had put in as well. He put the other foods back in the fridge as neatly as he could and carried both the rice and seaweed over to the counter. Another few minutes of searching around the various drawers allowed him to procure a roll of plastic wrap, which he took a square off. The puzzles and object recognition that Sakura had put him through was indeed helping him now as he put a handful's worth of rice in the plastic wrap, salting it a little with salt from the little dish Sakura had brought in from their first object recognition exercise.

Sasuke shaped the rice carefully into triangular shape and once satisfied, he wrapped it with some of the seaweed he had found. Setting the first completed snack down on the large plate he had pulled from the cover, he started to work on the second. He set the sixth and final rice final plate as he heard the water from the shower turn off in the bathroom. Sakura would be out soon. Stacking the smaller plates, and balancing the platter of rice balls, he slowly walked over to the table, knowing that if he fell, then that would be set back as they would waste time cleaning up instead of training. He made it to the table without incident however and put out a plate for him and Sakura, the platter of rice balls in the center of the table.

The second round from the counter to the table resulted in the tea mugs to be set up next to his and Sakura's plates. The bathroom

door creaked open in the distance, and that brought to his mind that Sakura would probably want to have something more to eat than rice balls. Becoming a medical ninja had brought to her attention the importance of eating a balanced meal. As long as Sasuke didn't have to work out which food groups and the like for each meal, it didn't bother him.

The footfalls came quietly to the kitchen entryway as he was closing the container of rice. She had paused in surprise and had not moved from her position, presumably at a loss for words. A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as he walked over to the fridge, opening the door and sliding the box in where he had left room for it.

"You made onigiri," she said after a moment, sounding a little baffled.

"Aa," he replied, closing the door to the fridge, feeling somewhat proud of himself. Sitting down at the table, he waited politely for her, "I didn't make any tea. Or anything to go with them."

"Oh...well—I can do that," she said after a pause, still sounding completely thrown off, but hurried into the kitchen nonetheless.

"There may be rice on the counter," he added as she moved about the small room.

On top of tea, Sakura ended up making a quick vegetable tray, which contained some very iron-laced lettuce. Not that Sasuke minded at all, he had always preferred the white part of the lettuce more; something that many people failed to understand. Sakura had complimented the rice balls he had made, but in return he only gave a shrug. Personally,

after having years of practice, he thought they weren't nearly as good as some he had made in the past.

"You can have the last one," he told her, having kept count of how many had disappeared from the plate each time he took another.

"Thanks," she replied, and he heard her reach for it.

"When are we going to train?" he asked her in a straightforward manner. The question would have sounded outright rude if he had asked it to anyone but Sakura; she was used to his behaviour, and knew that he hadn't meant the question impolitely.

"Right after I collect the dishes," she stated after audibly swallowing some of the rice ball, "We're going to Training Ground Three. I'll tell you what we'll be doing when we get there."

It was when they arrived at Training Ground Three that Sakura dropped Sasuke's arm and stepped away from his stationary form. No emotions were betrayed on his face as she stood before him, studying him.

"As I told you yesterday, we're going to be starting taijutsu training today," she said getting right the point, "I don't know how much you relied on hand-eye coordination when striking your opponents, so I want to test your skill. Hit me."

"What?"

"You heard me," she replied with an amused smile, "Don't hold back."

He frowned and did not move. "I don't want to render you unconscious."

A frown of her own creased her face; why was he hesitating? She was surprised; she thought that Sasuke would have swung at her with no second thoughts. She didn't think that he could hurt her, but apparently he thought otherwise; she wasn't sure if he was overconfident in his skill or if he thought that she did not have much skill herself.

"You won't. Even if you do manage to hit me, I'll be fine," she replied in a curt tone, then repeated: "Don't hold back."

He raised a fist uncertainly, taken up a fight stance. She took one up as well, not so much so that she would attack him, but so that she could dodge any hits he threw at her. She did not doubt the Uchiha's skill at all.

"Too scared to hit me?" she taunted, deciding to attack his pride—something she found herself doing more and more, "If you were a man, you wouldn't act like a coward."

Perhaps that was laying it on a bit thick, he saw through the last statement fairly easily.

"I would be a man to hit a woman?" he smirked slightly.

"No," she replied evenly, a smirk on her own lips now, "To hit a kunoichi, don't be scared to hit me."

"I'm not," he replied coldly, her comments beginning to rub him the wrong way, "I'm worried to hit you."

"Coward," she remarked mockingly.

He really looked like he really was about to hit her, but at the last moment he restrained himself. Her frown of displeasure deepened; Sasuke would have hit anyone by this point, but the fact that he had not yet tried to hurt her suggested strongly that he was indeed concerned for her. Of course that wouldn't do, because she couldn't find out anything if he refused to fight.

"When I sparred with Naruto, he wasn't scared to hit me," she tried again, keeping the face of taunting him, "He took it like a real training session."

"Fine," he snapped angrily at her, clenching his fist tighter, "But don't complain if I hurt you."

With that statement, he swung his fist at her, aiming at her face, where the sound of her voice had come from; she had anticipated this and simply shifted slightly to the left, his fist soaring harmlessly by her ear. His speed had been extraordinarily quick, Inner Sakura was telling Outer Sakura, as expected. His speed was up from his genin level, granted, but even though she had taken it into consideration, the speed was remarkable. But something didn't sit right—even with the speed, he wasn't going as fast as he potentially could, he was holding back.

Outer Sakura took in this information from Inner Sakura subconsciously, not paying much attention to it as she became aware of Sasuke's left fist coming in lower for a second swipe, attempting to land a hit on her before he hit the ground. The momentum of his first punch threw off his balance, and as he fell past her, he made a second attempt with his other hand, using the force of falling to give more strength to his blow. Sakura knew immediately that she wouldn't be able to dodge this hit without leaping clear of the fight completely, which would be unfair in the close-proximity combat, considering Sasuke's condition. Focusing chakra in her hand she reached out and grabbed his incoming fist; the blow would have broken her hand if she didn't use the chakra to cushion it.

Sasuke was now falling on her right, his left arm pinned underneath him and unable to move it because she was hanging onto it. Taking advantage of the position, Sakura pulled on his left fist, pulling his shoulder, and consequently causing his whole body to be jerked unceremoniously over. He twisted in the air as a result of her pull and continued to spin until he was completely over; Sakura had not released his hand, and when he landed roughly on the ground, his left arm was in the air, restrained by Sakura, and her foot was on his back, pinning him to the ground. In a last feeble attempt to strike her, he swung his right arm around behind him, trying to hit her foot off his back. Sakura merely raised the heel of her foot and effectively trapped his right wrist under her heel when it arrived.

"Okay, that was good," she told him after a moment, Inner Sakura briefly basking in the glory of victory. She released his arm and took her foot off his back, and as he stood to his feet, grumbling, she gave him a hand, "You did very well: your aim was good, surprisingly good; you compensated for my dodge and tried to hit with your other hand. Contrarily, once you had initiated those attacks, you couldn't guess where I went from there."

"Obviously," he spat grouchy as he grabbed his arm away from her, and she could tell that he was irritated with her. Sakura smirked; poor sport.

"This is where it gets difficult," she said, running over the different taijutsu training concepts she had thought of in her mind; granted she had plenty of time to think it over the past month and a bit, but still the ideas were scarce. She had hoped to find time to get away to the library to perhaps research the matter further, but Sasuke's rehab had taken most of her time. Rehab was getting on remarkably well, but it would be a couple more months before she could say that he could manage completely on his own.

"Difficult how?" he asked when she did not elaborate. She cursed herself for her tendency to get distracted.

"I would say that your hearing has sharpened over the past month, and I was hoping to incorporate that factor into the training; basically, I want you to learn the different attacks I will launch at you by their respective sounds," Sakura told, him slowly, still running over the concept in her mind. The idea was still vague in her mind and she wasn't sure if it would work, "I won't lie to you, this is still in theory, but I think it'll work. It'll also enhance your hearing so that you are easily able to pick up on subtler sounds, even if it doesn't work that well for taijutsu. The end results of this training should be that even if I make variations in my attacks, you should be able to recognize the different movements' sound and predict the attack. This will take a long time, and even with practice, my estimate is that you'll only be able to guess my movements about ninety percent of the time."

"And how am I to hear your attacks?" he asked her, the irritated tone fading from his voice.

"Rustle of clothing, clinking of baubles and other things that I may have on me—coins, jewelry, the kunai and shuriken colliding in my weapons pouch," she replied lightly, "Things like that. Even if your opponent was fighting naked—which we won't be covering—you should still be able to pick up on the disruption of air molecules."

He seemed amused at the notion, and Sakura smiled slightly.

"Will I be learning these movements through listening to routine practice, or will you be trying to hit me?" he asked, slightly wary, as if expecting her to attack him right at that instant.

"Just the movements to begin with," she laughed at his suspicious nature, "Remember, Sasuke, this is only the first day. Maybe if you can guess a majority of my movements by the end of the day, I'll let you try and hit me again. —Oh, and don't hold back again."

She gave a light laugh as the back of Sasuke's neck turned red in embarrassment; she had a feeling that he wouldn't hesitate next time.

"The host is still weak," came the quiet and calm voice, but there was an undertone of irritation in it, "To remove the demon now would only kill the both of them; that cannot happen. What are you going to do about it?"

Itachi's crimson irises shifted over the speaker, who was shrouded in the shadows of the dark room. Itachi could barely make out the outline of the form, but distinct indigo blue eyes, stood out from the shadows. Akatsuki's leader—a man that Itachi secretly loathed, though outwardly respected.

"I shall then strengthen the host," Itachi replied equally as calm, but lacking the irritation, replacing it with dislike, "When the time is right,

we shall then take the demon."

"Very well," the figure waved a dismissive hand, "The brat is yours to care for."

Itachi wouldn't have worded the statement in that manner. 'Caring' for the brat sounded too emotionally attached. Instead of commenting, he averted his eyes to the ground, giving a small respectful bow.

"I take my leave."

Straightening up again, he walked toward the heavy iron door, ignoring the contemptuous gaze that was boring into his back. He held a deep resentment to the other man in the room due to the fact that he had been ordered to stop pursuing Kyuubi for the time being, told plainly that they could not hope to acquire it until they had obtained more of the other tailed beasts. Even though Itachi had no interest whatsoever in the Six-Tailed Weasel he had brought back to the hideout, he had been ordered to collect the Jinchuuriki, whether it was the demon of his choice or no. Needless to say he had been very angry and taken his rage out on a local village, which, as a result, no longer existed.

The door groaned open as he pulled on the handle, and a muffled shout was emitted as someone tumbled in the room from outside. Looking down at the pathetic lump that was lying on the floor, he recognized the girl that was the weasel's host—he hadn't yet found out her name. There was a pause in the room, and the girl picked herself up from the floor, not looking at either of the room's occupants, embarrassed.

He looked at her for a moment, noting that she was still slender and frail; she had spent most of her time over the last three weeks with healers, treating her of numerous diseases that had come with being locked up in a room for as long as she had been. He had seen her a number of times, checking up on both the Bijuu's and Jinchuuriki's state, and she only seemed to feel secure around him, opposed to

the other members of the Akatsuki. Also, she had taken to doing menial chores for him, and hanging around his chambers when he was busy. Because the girl was still as thin and frail as before, the red-clouded Akatsuki robe appeared much larger on her than it actually was—at least she was clean now.

"Itachi-sama," she uttered after a very pregnant pause, fidgeting with nervousness.

He looked away from her and beckoned for her to follow him down the dank hallway outside. The door thundered shut behind them as it closed, the booming sound vibrations dying away slowly to silence, silence disturbed only by the girl's footsteps, his own feet making no noise. She was tailing him apprehensively, but he just kept his vision locked on the hall in front of him.

"Who was that man?" she whispered to him after a moment, her voice sounding loud despite the hushed tone.

"That was the leader of Akatsuki," he replied after a moment, "He is very strong and powerful; do not ever do anything to displease him."

"Hai," she replied hurriedly; in his peripheral vision he could see fear on her face.

They walked along the path for a while longer, taking a turn left when they came to a juncture in the underground hideout where Akatsuki dwelled. The mountainside tunnels were devoid of life for the most part, as there were only the other members and a few rogue ninja working in various positions. Other than the occasional rat, or if there were designated meetings, chances of running into someone was unlikely.

"When the leader talked about... 'the host'...he meant me, right?" the girl said after a while, sounding agitated.

"Yes."

"Itachi-sama, I'm not going to die...am I?" she sounded like she was doing her best not to cry.

"What is your name?" Itachi said after a moment, picking his words carefully and easily, knowing the kind of response he must give if the girl were to remain unsuspecting of her fate.

"I wasn't given one," she replied, sounding ashamed, "...not that I know of."

"Then you shall be called Nariko," Itachi told her firmly after a moment's consideration; it was a fitting name, considering the power of the demon within her, "I give you this name because you are going to be here longer than was expected, and I need something by which to call you."

"I'm staying here longer?" Nariko sounded both worried and confused.

"Your body is weak. What you heard our leader say was true, if we take the demon out of you now, you and it will both die," he explained impassively, "I am to make sure you gain some strength before we take it out of you, then we shall lock up the demon and you will be returned home."

"...Home," was the wistful and almost dreamy response, "...And then they'll like me, they'll accept me."

Giving a small noncommittal nod in the girl's direction, he inwardly scorned her for her gullibility. Often when they took the hosts of the demons away from their towns, the people never cared to come looking for them, simply not caring—most of them were often relieved. Nariko would never return to her village; she would die the instant the Bijuu was removed, and that would be that. There was no way to save her pathetic soul, not that there was anyone who would miss it.

"Itachi-sama?"

He glanced over at her hopeful and almost delighted face, "Do you think my parents will be happy to see me? Do you think they'll like me—love me?"

He let a little more of the hallway to be covered by his strides before answering the question, "I am sure they will."

Truly pitiful.

Sakura was sitting down on the ground next to Sasuke, his one arm grasped gently while she applied chakra to the bruises she had given him, healing them.

They had spent the rest of the day with taijutsu training, not even stopping for lunch, and even now as evening was setting in, the thought of dinner hadn't really crossed their minds, both too absorbed in the difficult training to notice. True to her word, she had granted him a fight because he was able to correctly tell her which movements she had performed, and as she had asked, he hadn't held back this time. He had been significantly faster this time, and she had a very swollen cheek at the moment, from when she couldn't dodge fast enough. Other than that, she was fine—Sasuke on the other hand had suffered a few blows from her blocking his attacks; he tried to hit her with such force that she had to use chakra multiple times to prevent serious damage, and the chakra had caused him to bruise, but not her.

"You've gotten really quick," she told him with muffled speech, the swelling interfering with her tongue.

"You said not to hold back," he told her, with a small shrug once she had released him.

"I'm not complaining," she said, raising her hand to her face; healing one's own wounds was easier because the unconscious mind knew each and every part of one's own body, thus being able to have better control over the chakra, resulting in faster healing.

"How's your wound?" he asked her after a moment.

She smiled slightly, lowering her hand from her face, the healing already finished, "I've suffered worse."

No flicker of emotion crossed his face at this comment, so instead she tapped his shoulder, a way she told him to stand without actually voicing it. She took his arm after they had both risen to their feet, his skin still warm from the flow of chakra she had applied to his bruised arm.

"It's been a long day," she said to him, "Would you like to stop for supper before going home, or should I make something when we get back?"

"We haven't been on our daily walk," he told her evenly and she raised her eyebrows slightly in surprise. She had always gotten the impression that Sasuke had never liked going on the walks because he never really considered it training to begin with; apparently she was wrong.

"Oh, well, we can do that instead if you like," she knew she had failed at masking the surprise in her voice, "Where would you like to go?"

"Has the sun set?"

Her confusion deepened, "...No, not yet, but—"

"I want to go somewhere where you can see the sunset," he told her, giving the small impatient tug on her arm, signifying that he wanted her to move.

She mentally winced at his words. She could never tell which was worse: when he metaphorically said that he saw things, or said that he wanted her to see things for him. Either way painfully reminded her of his condition and how terrible it must not be able to see.

"I think I know just the place," she told him after a moment's consideration, then pulled him along.

The sun was sinking slowly in the western horizon and she knew that if they wanted to get to that place in time to see the setting sun, they would have to hurry. They left the outdoor training grounds within fifteen minutes, and Sakura took Sasuke to the rooftops in order to avoid crowds on the streets when getting through town, a feat which Sasuke had a little difficulty with, but got the hang of it after about ten houses down the way. She expertly made her way across town a location where she knew they both had strong memories of. She notified Sasuke that she was going to jump down from the top of a building as they reached the location, Sakura pulling Sasuke over to a red wooden bridge. It was the bridge where they waited long periods of time—sometimes hours—for Kakashi to show up and oversee an upcoming mission.

"Where are we?" he asked, sounding utterly disoriented as she took both his hands and laid them on the railing of the bridge, facing towards the sunset.

"We're at the bridge where we would wait for Kakashi-sensei during our genin days," she remarked warmly, "The sunset should look nice from here."

She took a position next to him, looking over the small river that ran beneath them as the sun began to dip down below the canopy of the trees on the right bank. Making herself comfortable, she looked out over the peaceful scene; most people were at home eating dinner and as a result there was nobody around.

"Describe it to me," he told her after a brief moment, "Describe the sunset."

She cleared her throat and swept her gaze over the sky before beginning, "The sun is slowly sinking down in the sky on the western horizon, like a large orb of molten glass, glowing white. The sky is painted with a myriad of reds, yellows and oranges, wreathing the

sun in a warm-hued rainbow, while the sky above us is fading into the indigo hues of twilight. A couple strands of cirrus clouds are drifting lazily ahead, glowing pink as they pass a patch of sky that is glowing a shade of vermillion.

"The sun is now dipping down behind the trees, and the broad leaves that have fully unfurled are silhouetted against the light, the edges rimmed in a golden glow—the sight seems almost supernatural. As they rustle in the wind, the light is scattered on the river's turbulent surface, and an array of shining ripples reflect the scattered light back up at us. As I look at you now, the light patterns shift over your face and dispel the shadows, seeming to fade into them and eradicate them.

"The sun has now disappeared behind the trees completely, and all that's left is the trace of gold which lines the arch of twilight that is setting in from behind. The cirrus clouds have faded to a lilac shade of purple and are slowly shifting to a midnight blue. The first star has appeared in the southwestern sky, shining like a shard of the purest crystal; the moon is nowhere to be seen."

She finished off her description, while gazing out at the river, watching the lone star tumble over the waves of the ultramarine surface, disappearing and reappearing from view. A cool breeze rippled through the air, and the heat that came from exercise had long worn off; she shivered.

"You should wear something warmer," he told her after a moment, standing perfectly still.

"After giving you a description like that, that's all you have to say to me?" she stated with mock irritation, a smile on her face.

He said nothing to this, falling into a thoughtful silence. She looked up at his serious face and she wondered what was on his mind; he was so unreadable, almost to the point that his world was intangible, untouchable. Even after living a month with him, he still was very reluctant to open up to her; while he told her things that she knew he

would not tell anyone else, those occasions were rare, and often she had to prod him into telling her what he was thinking. He still was a tad wary around her, despite what he said to her in the hospital about trusting her, and even though she knew that she shouldn't be surprised, it hurt her a little.

"It was a good description," his voice was quiet, almost like he was saying it to himself rather than her.

Perhaps it was the tone in his voice, or maybe it was a wave of sympathy that suddenly washed over her as he uttered those words, but whatever the reason, she found herself compelled to do something to reassure him—reassure him of what, she did not know. Tentatively she slipped her arms around him, embracing him gently, as she looked out over the small river, the inconsistent flashes of light illuminating the both of them. He stiffened slightly under her touch but after a few seconds he accepted the gesture, and slowly, almost cautiously, he put an arm around her shoulders, holding her closer to him.

Surprise caused her breath to catch in her throat; she glanced up at him, and saw that his face was masked in complete seriousness. He was turned out towards the landscape, his expression completely devoid of emotion, his sightless eyes staring forward but focused on nothing. But even with a deceptive mask, or a cold demeanor, actions speak louder than words—and appearances.

"Sakura..." he murmured quietly, his words almost lost on the wind, "...Thank you."

Tears sprung up in her eyes at his words—the exact words he had imparted to her before he left the village, intent on never returning. The words prodded something deep within her soul, provoking memories that had been some of the saddest moments she had experienced. Never again—she promised herself, as they stood together on the bridge where their genin group used to meet—never again would she let him leave like that. She would not let him take that road again—the road that had caused him so much pain.

A/N: Yay for SasuSaku fluff. I thought we needed a bit more of it at the end of the chapter.

One of my goals with working with Itachi's character is to make him hated by the readers to some extent—I think it's working: I'm beginning to really hate the guy! Well, I did before, but like him even less now (if that's possible) :p

Btw, Nariko means thunder, just so you know. And for people who still don't get it, the six-tailed weasel's power is the use of lightning. (A combination of Wikipedia, Google and good resources can be extremely helpful—and reveal a lot of spoilers x.x Darn me and my extensive research.)

Chapter 17

A/N: You know what really kills drama? You're listening to sad-ish Naruto music to get inspiration and then when the song ends, Rock Lee's theme kicks in. Drama dead.

NOTICE: There were a couple of comments that I just felt that I should clarify for everyone. The most important being that this is NOT going to have an ItachiXNariko pairing in it. The second is that I am aware that many people like Itachi as a character. Well, even though I hate his guts, which I am not going to rant about here, there will be no character butchering, I promise you that. He will not suffer spontaneous misfortune because I hate him. I respect him as a character, and he shall play his role in the story equally. I believe in good literature, not character bashing.

Moving right along... :p

Chapter Seventeen: Genjutsu

Training blind with taijutsu was difficult, if not entirely frustrating. It was a week until the end of June, and a week since taijutsu training had begun—almost a month and a half since he had been brought to Konoha in mid-May. Even though his speed had managed to graze the side of Sakura's face during training the first day, she now predicted that and was able to compensate. Since that day a week ago, he could not land a single punch on the pink-haired kunoichi. Granted the exercises had made things easier in the sense that he could discern her which blows she would throw at him, and by the end of the week he could block about eighty to ninety percent of those attacks.

He remembered sparring her as a genin, and was surprised, if not a little irked to find that her technique hadn't changed at all. It was

becoming increasingly obvious as he sparred her now, his blocks one step ahead of her blows and a pattern falling into place. He supposed as a medical ninja she wasn't expected to have as much taijutsu or ninjutsu down, but it was a bit ridiculous to find that she hadn't advanced very far since those days back then.

A kick from the side came at him and he quickly blocked it with his arm; next would come a punch from her right arm; as expected, he blocked the blow as it came. He blocked the next few expected attacks, his mind searching for a possible opening in which he could get in an attack of his own.

Often he would keep her arms occupied with his blocks, and she would twist away out of his grasp before he could get at her, but if he could attack before then, he could have a chance of getting her. His two arms were presently occupied with blocks—he would have to go for a kick, a trip kick. He felt the pressure on his arms starting to ease, signaling that she was starting to spring away; he would have to strike before she was out of reach. He crouched speedily on his left leg, swiping out with his right, attempting to catch her at the side. He dropped his arms and braced against the ground, increasing the momentum of his kick. If she was surprised, and if he was fast enough, and if he hadn't waited too long, then maybe he could hit her. There were too many 'ifs'.

There was the quietest of gasps from Sakura and he smirked at the sound. He had indeed surprised her, and now he was going to gain an advantage. The sudden shock of meeting more air instead of colliding with her feet forced him to convert the momentum to returning him to a standing position to prevent spinning out on the ground. She had jumped out of the way at the very last moment, causing him to miss her entirely.

Movement from the side—sounded like a lunge from the rustle of the fabric. He rolled away quickly and was startled as she leapt over his crouched form and grabbed him from behind. That was new, he noted grimly as he felt the touch of cold kunai metal at his neck, she had never leapt over him before.

"That was good," she praised him, dropping the kunai from his throat, and pulling him back up onto his feet. A dark cloud of irritation formed in his mind as he dusted himself off; he was frustrated for two reasons: first of all, when he figured that he knew her attacks, she had gone and pulled a stunt like that. The second thing that bothered him was that even though he knew that it was almost inevitable that he would lose the fight against her, it still irked him to lose, despite the loss being a given.

"Once more," he told her, as she dropped her arm, getting into a ready position. He would beat her this time, he told himself—just like all the other times...

"No," she stated firmly, taking his hand, her thumb ran habitually over his knuckles, "We went without lunch yesterday, and I will not have you go without again. You need your strength, Sasuke. —It's one o'clock now, let's stop for lunch, then we'll come back for the afternoon and try something different for a while."

"Like what?" he demanded grouchy—in his opinion, nothing was more important than getting taijutsu down. What was she thinking, trying to stop with taijutsu training for the day?

"You need to become accustomed to laying and detecting traps while blind," she replied lightly with a shrug, "And I also want to try a genjutsu experiment on you, so you'll need plenty of energy to put up with what I've got planned."

Genjutsu experiment? He had always had a strong mistrust of genjutsu—and rightfully so. Mangekyou Sharingan was one of the cruelest of genjutsu attacks, and having experienced that damn technique twice, he had never felt the same towards illusionary jutsus. So when Sakura said genjutsu experiment, he immediately became wary of the notion; he knew Sakura would never do anything to hurt him intentionally. Even though he wouldn't admit it, he was worried.

Reluctantly he let her lead him from the vicinity, much rather wanting to stay and train the rest of the day with taijutsu as they had done all week. But he had come to know Sakura over the past month and a bit, much better than he had as when they were genin, and he knew that she would not hear of it. Sakura had changed in personality, but while she was still kind to him and watch over him, she no longer reserved her sharp tongue or stubborn temperament for Naruto. She was firm, stubborn, and scolded him when she felt he had done something he shouldn't have, but she was kind, gentle and was there for him. Something sharp seemed to poke his insides as he realized that Sakura was much like his mother had been—similar, yet different too.

He had also learned that while she often complained about her family, she deeply cared for them and he knew that she would be devastated if any of her immediate relatives were to be killed. She spoke fondly of her brother; she often protested about her father's tendency to be unreasonable; and she seemed to cherish her mother, whom Sasuke had come to respect in the few encounters he had with her.

As Sakura led him back to the village, chattering pleasantly about the weather or something of the sort, he thought of Sakura's family. Something within him seemed wistful, nostalgic and almost jealous—she had things that he no longer had, and he felt a protective instinct emerge. No one should ever go through what he had suffered; he would protect Sakura, her family and her friends, even if it killed him.

Sakura squeezed his hand suddenly as she became aware of his silence, "You're not mad at me because we stopped training, are you?"

"No," he replied shortly, shaking his head.

"Okay, well if you want to talk about it, just let me know," she said after a moment.

Always there to listen; she always accepted him, no matter what he did to her. The mere thought was almost implausible to him. It was then that he heard the quiet tune that she was humming into the summer breeze—the song his mother used to hum to him. Without really realizing it, he held her hand tighter; in response to the gesture, she put her other hand on his arm, walking closer to him in a supportive manner. And he didn't know why, but he didn't want to push her away; he wouldn't consciously acknowledge it, but the gesture reassured him.

"Oi! Sakura!"

A smile came to the face of the petal-haired kunoichi as she turned her head to the call of her name. The voice was very recognizable, after all she'd heard it her entire life. She and Sasuke stopped as she looked down the street to where they had just come from, where none other than her brother was jogging down the road towards them. Her smile turned to a playful grin as she mentally prepared herself for an onslaught of teasing, however the first thing Kanaye did was engulf her in an enormous bear hug and ruffle her cotton candy tresses.

"Hey!" she heard herself squawk in a very unladylike fashion, "Get off me! I'm caught on Sasuke's arm and you're hurting me!"

Kanaye released her with a laugh and beamed a smile at Sasuke, "Heya Uchiha."

Sasuke gave an acknowledging grunt but made no other indication that he had even heard Sakura's platinum-haired sibling.

"Still loaded with creative responses I see," Kanaye mused with a good-natured laugh, "You know, you need a nickname. 'Uchiha' sounds too formal and calling you by your first name sounds so strange."

"How about not?" Sasuke replied sourly, shoving his hands in his pockets now that Sakura had dropped his arm.

Sakura grinned at the ebony-haired youth's behaviour and turned a grin to her brother, "When did you get back? And how long until your next mission?"

"I got back yesterday—the next mission I hope will be ages away," Kanaye replied heartily, shrugging off Sasuke's behaviour as well, then added in a teasing tone, "Why do you ask? So eager to get rid of me already?"

"Of course," she replied lightly, her eyes sparkling, "You have no idea how quiet it is around here with you gone. And if you and Naruto *both* leave for missions at the same time, it's so silent that you can hear a pin drop from the other end of town."

"Ha. Ha," Kanaye remarked sarcastically before giving her a light punch in the shoulder, "Where were the both of you yesterday? I went to the house but you guys weren't there. At all. All day."

"Oh, well we were out training all day yesterday," Sakura replied, with a shrug, "I'm not surprised we weren't home—Naruto's been complaining, saying we're anti-social. In any case, how do you know we were gone the whole day?"

"I sat there and waited. For *four* hours," Kanaye explained with a shrug.

"Stalker," Sakura threw in with a smirk.

"But training?" he raised an eyebrow and turned to the silent Sasuke, "My sympathies, friend."

"Oh, stop it," Sakura retorted indignantly, "You make it sound like I'm violent—you'll taint my reputation as a kind and caring medic-nin."

"Kind and caring medic-nin?" Kanaye laughed, "This is coming from the person who beat Naruto up for doing who-knows-what, and then heals him so she can beat him up all over again."

At this remark Sasuke gave a snort of deep amusement; Sakura and Kanaye both turned and looked over at the Uchiha in surprise. A wide smirk decorated his lips and he seemed profoundly entertained by the mere notion.

"Almost had a laugh there," Sakura commented, blinking slightly, before turning back to Kanaye, "And Naruto deserved that!"

However her elder sibling wasn't paying attention, but was rather studying Sasuke with mild interest. "I've decided to embark on an daring quest and document it so that it shall one day be shared with the world. I shall call it *My Epic Adventure on getting to Know Sasuke Better* . Chapter one: Trying to make Sasuke laugh. –But before I begin, he needs a nickname."

At this statement Sasuke turned his head towards Kanaye's general direction and raised his eyebrows ever so slightly—a slightly annoyed expression was on his face, bordering the emotion 'peeved'. Sakura on the other hand burst out laughing and couldn't stop for about thirty seconds, a time span in which she had received a number of stares from passing onlookers.

When she had finally managed to get her giggles under control, she managed to gasp out a statement between her deep breaths. "I wish you luck on your epic endeavor, Kanaye," she mused breathlessly, "you'll need it."

"You always have the utmost confidence in me Sakura," he replied dramatically, "You flatter me."

"Yeah, yeah. Shut up," she smirked, holding her cramped stomach, "Anyways, we were on our way for lunch—do you want to come along?"

Taking this as an indication that they were going to be moving again, Sasuke reached out with his arm; she automatically linked hers with it.

"If this guy doesn't mind—" Kanaye said jokingly, giving Sasuke a light punch on the arm, "—sure. —I really need to come up with a nickname for you."

"I don't mind," Sasuke said with a growl, shrugging noncommittally, "No nicknames."

A smile came to Sakura's lips; she got the feeling that Sasuke had just agreed to Kanaye's presence because she had already invited him to come along, and was merely being polite—as polite as Uchiha Sasuke could be. Inside she got an inkling that Sasuke wouldn't mind anyways that her brother tagged along; if he could stand Naruto, he could definitely put up with Kanaye.

"Come on, let's go," she said brightly with a light laugh, leading Sasuke by the arm down the street while grabbing Kanaye's sleeve and dragging him after them, "There's a nice café that Lee-san took me to once; we'll go there."

"What? You went out with a *guy*?" Kanaye suddenly exclaimed with melodrama, "My little sister is growing up!"

Sakura merely rolled her eyes. Kanaye had become acquainted with a number of her guy friends that she often hung out with, but he hadn't come to know many of them as well as he had known Naruto. While he did not know Lee as well as he did Konoha's number one loud-mouthed ninja, he had met him and knew that there was as much of a relationship between her and Lee as there was between her and Naruto.

"Oh, just shut up," she retorted, shaking her head slightly, tired of the teasing.

Sakura was too busy leading them towards the café she mentioned to notice, but Sasuke faltered slightly at Sakura's ambiguous retort. Kanaye had caught the movement though and studied the young Uchiha for an insightful moment. Sakura's response was a clear indication that she had never gone out with Lee, but the tone in her voice merely sounded annoyed. If one did not see her actions, her remark could be interpreted two ways: the first was that she was annoyed at her brother and just wanted him to back off; the second was that she was on the defensive over the matter and didn't want any more meddling in her private life.

Maybe Sasuke had just stumbled on the path, but Kanaye was doubtful—he had strong suspicions that his small stagger had something to do with interpretation number two. Now why this would bother the youth that was currently hanging on to Sakura's arm, he didn't know—but he had his suspicions and was going to do what he could to find out the answers. Getting answers from someone who didn't know, or trust you—hmm, could be difficult, better get working on his epic quest.

"Oi, Sasuke," he called out to the dark-haired man suddenly, "What do you think of the nickname 'Spikey'?"

Sasuke almost stumbled again while Sakura choked on her spit.

"Absolutely not," Sasuke replied firmly, casting a trademark glare in the platinum-haired jounin's general area.

Sakura merely smiled from where she was at, resisting the urge to giggle. It would be an interesting day to say the least.

Sasuke was still feeling grouchy from the early morning losses that he had suffered while training, and while he didn't mind Sakura's brother, said sibling wasn't doing anything to improve his mood. It was like having a second, less annoying—not to mention more mature—Naruto around. Sakura had beaten him twelve times that morning, five of which had occurred in very short succession

between each other. Sometimes it was almost impossible to tell where on earth she was coming from or what her attack was. The rustling of her clothes and the jangle of objects helped to some extent, but it became almost useless on a windy day.

The losses themselves were a hassle, but the addition of Sakura's brother, Kanaye, bouncing nicknames off of him wasn't really making his day any better. He was brooding, and he knew it. So what? He didn't care what others thought. He would much rather be training and devising methods of how he could conceivably kill Itachi than take a break for lunch.

The first indications that they had arrived at the café came when the chatter of people on the streets became more concentrated off to the left, and as Sakura guided him in that direction, he knew his assumption was correct. He was slightly thankful to have finally arrived, despite wanting to skip lunch all together—he was tired of having Kanaye bouncing nicknames off of him.

"Is this the place?" asked said jounin.

"Yeah," Sakura confirmed cheerfully pausing in front of the outdoor seating.

"I see a table over there," Kanaye said, his voice projected slightly away from the two of them, "Do we just take a seat or what...?"

"Go grab it before someone else takes it!" Sakura snapped hastily at her brother, and Sasuke couldn't help but be reminded of how she treated Naruto.

"Okay, okay! Sheesh!" Kanaye exclaimed before his footsteps were heard jogging away.

Sakura sighed slightly on his right and she led Sasuke in the direction of the footsteps. She was humming that song again, but quietly; sometimes he wished she wouldn't, sometimes he wished she would—right now he was feeling both. He was distracted by the

melody, so he almost committed another graceless act that day and crashed into her.

"Here, sit down, Sasuke," Sakura disentangled her arm from him and took his wrist, leading his arm to the back of a plastic chair. Her voice was turned away from him, so he assumed that when she spoke the second time, she was speaking to her brother, "It's a typical café: you go to the counter, pick what you want, pay for it and eat it. It's pretty busy today—tell me what you want, and I'll get it for you. Saves time that way."

"You're in an awful hurry to get lunch over with," came the older man's voice from across the table, a chair scraping against the ground as he pulled it out.

"Busy training schedule today," she replied, and this time Sasuke couldn't imagine what facial expression she had on, "What do want for lunch, Sasuke?"

"Anything," he replied, crossing his arms and reclining back, "You know what kind of stuff I don't like."

"Kay. Kanaye?"

"I'll have a large slice of cake," he declared after a moment's consideration.

"That's far from healthy."

"I know."

A resigning sigh followed, "Fine, fine. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Her footsteps were soon lost in the chattering of the crowds, disappearing amid the clamor that came with conversation. Sasuke sat up in his chair, leaning forward so he could rest his elbows on the table, his fingers laced together under his nose. Even though he couldn't see it, but he could tell that Sakura's brother was gazing at

him intently, and after a minute or two of silence he heard the jounin shuffle his chair slightly to his left.

"It's a little creepy when you do that and I'm sitting opposite you. It looks like you're staring at me," Kanaye said in explanation of his movement, but Sasuke merely shrugged.

"Quaint place, this is," the older man continued after a moment's pause, figuring out that Sasuke wasn't going to comment, "I can see why Sakura liked it when she came here with Lee."

Outwardly, Sasuke made no movement, and inwardly he frowned slightly with confusion. Lee...that was the guy who helped carry Sakura's things all the way back whenever. Naruto called him hairy brows or something of the sort. As the wheels turned inside his head, the image of a green-clad, bowl-haired young man with abnormally thick eyebrows came to mind; he remembered now, the pet pupil of Maito Gai. A slight frown began to descend externally on his attractive face—Sakura had come here with that guy?

Sasuke was too preoccupied with the concept to notice Kanaye's gaze on him. It wasn't his business whom Sakura went places with, and he frankly didn't care. He was more or less confused by the prospect instead of bothered by it. Of course it was absurd to expect her to wait forever on him, and he supposed he shouldn't have been surprised if she went out with other guys. But Maito Gai's student of all people? What on earth had caught Sakura's eye that had turned her attention away from Sasuke and towards Lee...?

"You seem perplexed," came Kanaye's voice, jolting Sasuke slightly from his reverie.

He gave a grunt that could easily be interpreted as 'bugger off' before shoving all thoughts aside. The fact that Sakura had possibly gone out with Lee did not bother him; Sakura's love life wasn't his business, and he definitely wasn't going to concern himself with it. He was pretty sure that she still loved him, even though he hadn't heard her say it since he had left; and even though she had gone out

with other guys, it didn't necessarily mean that she had ever felt anything serious for any of them. Not that he cared either way.

After another long spell of quiet, the man who sat at the table with him braved conversation once more, "So, Sasuke, tell me about yourself."

"What do you want to know?" Sasuke resigned to reply, turning his attention to Sakura's older sibling.

"Anything," Kanaye said lazily, "What are your interests? Likes, dislikes. Favourite colour. Whatever you want."

"Training covers my interests. I don't like a lot of things. I dislike many things. Black," he replied evenly.

"You sound like a very interesting person," was the reply, and Sasuke wasn't sure whether it was intended to be sarcastic or not, "But you're very vague."

He gave a light shrug, "I suppose."

"How are things at the house going?"

"Fine."

"How's the weather been?"

"Warm."

"Do you answer questions in anything but one word answers?"

"Rarely."

Kanaye suddenly slapped his hand down on the table. Sasuke didn't flinch; the rustling of the clothing indicated to him what the young man was doing, but he had no idea why he was doing it.

"Now we're getting somewhere!" Kanaye exclaimed enthusiastically, causing Sasuke to raise his eyebrows slightly. He supposed he had to admire the determination Sakura's brother showed in wanting to get to know him.

Approaching footfalls faded into earshot, and mercifully, they were Sakura's.

"What are you doing, Kanaye?" she asked in a tone that Sasuke heard her use when she was annoyed with Naruto.

"Sasuke and I are just getting to know each other better," came the cheerful reply as Sakura set down what sounded like tray on the table, "What? Carrot cake? No chocolate? It's like you're afraid I'm going to get hyper or something."

A light clink of glass tabletop against plate occurred in front of Sasuke, and he took his elbows from the table, politely waiting while Sakura set out the food.

"Hyperactivity is mentally-induced, Kanaye," Sakura replied sitting down on Sasuke's left, "Your pancreas uses insulin to regulate the sugar levels in your bloodstream, so no matter how much cake you eat, you won't get hyper from it."

"Then why'd you get me *carrot* cake?" he complained, and Sasuke was almost reminded of Naruto—almost.

"Because if I let the idea of carrot cake deter you mentally, you won't get hyper off of it," she replied lightly, before there was the tinkle of cutlery. When she spoke again, it was directed at him, "I got you a sandwich, I hope it's enough."

"Aa."

"Sakura, you were more fun to be around before you became a medic," Kanaye said with a sigh, "Carrot cake indeed!"

With Sasuke's broad hints pressing for more training, lunch passed swiftly and soon they both managed to remove themselves from Kanaye's presence, but not before he had made many more attempts to 'get to know Sasuke' and bounced a number of nicknames off the young Uchiha. Along with 'Spikey', some of said nicknames were 'emo guy', 'pyromaniac', 'hey you', and 'silent person', before he finally settled on calling him 'Emo Prince', proceeding to refer to Sasuke as 'his highness' for the rest of the lunch hour. Sakura was half-scolding Kanaye, half trying not to laugh—which didn't particularly please Sasuke, especially because he couldn't see what was so terribly funny. He was at least glad that she had the sense not to call him 'Emo Prince' as well.

After politely excusing them, Sakura had taken him back to Training Ground Three, where she was now spending the better part of the hour setting up a number of different non-lethal traps while he practiced his taijutsu on a helpless test dummy. The training dummy was oddly satisfying to beat on—at least he could land some hits, and not appear completely graceless like he did when up against Sakura. It would be untruthful to assume that he hadn't hit her at all, but most of his attacks were blocked, even if he threw in all the force that he could.

It mystified him that she could block such attacks and not end up injured, because when he had used his brute strength against Orochimaru's opponents, he often caused the bones of his enemies to shatter. How on earth did Sakura block his attacks without becoming injured? It was apparent to him that while her attack routine wasn't any better she had dramatically improved in her defense.

' *How...?*' he asked himself while taking another violent blow at the dummy, completely shattering part of its face.

It was something that he knew that he couldn't muster, blocking blows like that, not without injuring himself. That's why speed was such an important factor in his technique; he had to get out of dangerous situations before he got hurt. Yet Sakura could take one

of his strongest blows and not become injured at all. In fact, the only time that he had hit her, she said he had bruised her, and he realized that was because she had not gotten out of the way in time, and he had underestimated her then too, not hitting her too hard.

Sakura—she was so much more mysterious about herself now than they were when they were kids. She hadn't once mentioned the depression she had suffered during his absence, nor had she spoken much about her apprenticeship with the Hokage. In fact, if that woman, Anko, hadn't mentioned that Sakura had become a chuunin, he most likely wouldn't have found out at all. Contrarily, she was outspoken and would voice her opinion often; she would talk to him about almost anything, and even reprimand him—something she wouldn't have done years ago.

"Sasuke!" Sakura called to him from a direction somewhere behind him.

Relaxing his stance, he turned to face her, letting her know that he heard her.

"I've finished setting up the traps," she told him, "I want you to try and make it over to where I am without setting many off."

He shelved all perplexing thoughts he currently had on Sakura, and focused on the task at hand. He needed a good challenge; it helped keep his mind from wandering where he did not want it to go.

Sakura watched with slight interest as Sasuke began carefully walking across the open area clearing that lay between her and him. There were a number of traps, but she knew that some he would come across right away, because he would be able to feel the strings before setting them off. His senses had grown better over the month and he was starting to pick up on sounds that even she hadn't noticed right away. Additionally, he seemed to have developed a sort of reflex action to moving away from things he abruptly contacted, so coming across a trip wire would be easy for him. However the other

traps, which she had buried underground—she would have to see how he would react to those.

As he approached the first tripwire, Sakura sat down at a base of a tree, watching his behaviour. Each footfall was placed with care, and as his leg brushed the first of the wires, he abruptly took a step backwards. That was close, she mused; the pressure on the line had bordered on setting the trap off. He kneeled and reached out carefully, his hands grasping the wire with care. He ran his fingers along the thin metal and after a moment, stood up again, taking a step over it.

' *Not bad,*' she smiled, but it was far from over.

The next few traps proved to be easy finds as he crawled over and under each one without difficulty, however, as he stepped out over the first pitfall she had quickly dug— using the techniques she had learned with Tsunade—Sasuke ran into a little difficulty. He had put his foot down on the earth and felt it give a little under his weight; removing his foot and putting it back on solid ground, he stood motionless for a moment, pondering the dilemma. Sakura gave a small smile, Inner Sakura smirking broadly; the pitfalls weren't deep, only a foot, but Sasuke didn't know that. Of course he could rule them out as being dangerously deep, because she hadn't spent that much time with the traps, however the unknown depth could still cause injury. Also, the goal of this exercise was to avoid setting off any of the traps, so it would be better if he didn't set it off at all.

He also faced a problem with how long and wide the hole was, and what shape it was in. For all he knew he could be standing in the middle of a horseshoe-shaped hole, where there was a pitfall on all sides except the way he had come from. It could be a foot across and he could just step over it, or it could be very narrow and he could walk around it. He took an experimental step to the left and when satisfied that the earth wouldn't give way, moved to that position.

Sakura stretched luxuriously and leaned back against the tree. It would take the rest of the afternoon at this rate. She hoped it

wouldn't take too long—she wanted to get that genjutsu experiment done. Closing her eyes, she rested a little; when she had blocked his blows that morning, he had drained her chakra when she focused it in certain spots so that he wouldn't break her bones—she was tired, even though she didn't want to admit it. Sasuke would bother her about it if she let it show, saying that she shouldn't worry about him, and should get a decent night's sleep. Inner Sakura snarled at the very thought, the hell she was going to let him suffer those nightmares.

A sharp snap and a twang caused her to jump alert again as Sasuke set off one of the traps. She opened her eyes just in time to see a small bag she had filled with dirt, whack him in the back, knocking him forwards. Inner Sakura smirked as Sasuke landed on top of one of the pitfalls, promptly falling into the foot-deep hole. He had bypassed about ten of the thirty traps she put up, and had only set of two. He was doing well, she noted before closing her eyes again, ignoring Sasuke's colourful language.

"Sakura."

It took only a moment for her drowsy brain to register that she was being called. Jumping alert, she looked about wildly, trying to figure out where she was. Where were the medics? What was the situation? Was someone dying? Those were questions that automatically flitted across her mind as she was instantly awake. But the fumes of hospital disinfectants didn't meet her nose, nor were there the white painted hallways illuminated with that terrible fluorescent lighting.

Her body had become tense and ready to spring, but as she remembered where she was, she relaxed slightly, looking over at Sasuke, who was kneeling down next to her. She felt guilty; she had fallen asleep. Inner Sakura was introducing her forehead to a wall.

"You fell asleep," Sasuke told her needlessly, and Sakura blushed furiously.

"Sorry... I just..." her voice faded away, having no idea what to say.

A frown descended on his brow and she quickly stood up, trying to avoid what was coming.

"You're not getting enough sleep," he told her firmly, and she halted in her path, facing him defiantly.

"It doesn't matter," she told him, equally as firm, "Don't worry about me."

He grumbled incoherently, but otherwise made no other comment. Satisfied that using his own words against him had effectively silenced him, she turned away from him and surveyed the sight. As she had expected, a number of the last few traps had been set off, as she had made them for difficult; she noted with satisfaction that he had at least made it past half of the traps without setting them off.

"You did well," she said honestly, his silence unnerving her. When he made no response, she looked up at the sky; around four o'clock, she guessed, "How long did you let me sleep?"

"As long as it took me to find you," he replied, taking a few steps towards her, coming up beside her, his hands in his pockets.

"Then it took you an hour to get across," she stated, a small frown of displeasure crossing her face, "Much too slow. Well, forget about it for now—it's growing later in the day. I want to try that genjutsu on you."

"What did you have in mind?" he asked her, and she barely caught the tone of uncertainty in his voice.

"Just simple genjutsu," he told him, turning towards him to better study him. The uncertain tone did not match the emotionless expression on his face. She wondered if she had imagined it, "It's an experiment because I don't know how it'll work on you in your blind state. Genjutsus are illusionary techniques that work on the nervous

system by using your own chakra against you. So I'm wondering if it'll have no affect on you because I can't make real eye contact to disrupt your senses, or if you'll experience the illusion of sight because of the way it uses your own chakra."

"Assuming it works, what kind of illusion would you cast on me?" he asked after a moment's pause.

"I know a variety of genjutsus, I suppose I could let you pick the illusion, and I'll try to cast it on you," she said off-handedly, "Anything specific?"

He shook his head, "It doesn't matter."

"Okay," she shrugged, then moving to stand in front of him, "Make sure your eyes are facing straight ahead; I'm going to try it now."

She stared straight at his sightless eyes, aligning her viridian irises with his obsidian ones. A serious expression was on his face, and she noticed that he was slightly tensed up; she wondered dimly if he was nervous. Genjutsu was not something to be taken lightly, and you had to trust someone to a tremendous degree if you were to willingly let someone cast it on you. Selecting an illusion in her mind, she formed the signs with her hands, and signing the last symbol, she focused her chakra and threw the illusion in his direction.

At first Sasuke wondered if anything had even happened to begin with—it was still dark around him, there were no illusions, and there was still the rustling of the leaves. Then the world spun dangerously and he felt himself lose his balance, the ground seeming unnaturally soft, and fake. He was falling over, unable to get his balance, and as he fell, he kept falling, and falling.

' *Sasuke...?* '

The voice echoed from far away, almost drawn out on the whispers of the breeze. It came from everywhere, no fronts and backs, ups

and downs existing in the insubstantial world, yet he could recognize it as Sakura's voice. He tried turning his head, getting a pinpoint on her illusory location, but the vertigo was overwhelming, and he felt sick.

"Your genjutsu had better be me falling endlessly over in a world with no directions," he told the air, trying not to vomit, "because that's what I'm experiencing at the moment."

' No, that's not what it is at all,' came Sakura's voice, 'You can tell it's an illusion?'

"Yes," he croaked, holding onto his illusory stomach, "Unless you want me to feel the sensation of falling endlessly off a cliff."

There was a pause, and Sasuke continued to feel ill, before her voice came to him.

' Can you break out of it?'

He considered the possibility for a moment. Once the body became aware of an illusion, it was generally simple to escape a genjutsu, but all anomalies in genjutsu he had been trapped within were visual anomalies—he had never broken through one with distorted sensations. And there was one genjutsu he had been unable to break free from—one that shown him something that had been real, and was no illusion.

He released his stomach and made a hand seal that would disrupt his own chakra flow, "Kai."

The world instantly stilled, and he felt his back against the ground; a sharp rock was poking painfully into his right shoulder blade. He felt Sakura's hand on his shoulder, and while the wind was still blowing softly, there were now birdcalls in the air, something that had dissipated in the illusion.

"Okay, so that didn't have any affect on you—visually that is," she said quietly to herself; Sasuke didn't move from his spot, the rock in his back was a nice reminder he was back in the real world, "That could be advantageous—if an opponent doesn't realize that you're blind, and cast genjutsu, you won't be affected enough to fall fully into it."

He grunted at her voiced thoughts, he himself wondering when she had learned so much on genjutsu.

"If you don't mind, I want to try one more," she said after a moment's pause, "There's something Tsunade-sama taught me when I was studying under her. Though it's not as commonly used, due to it being in an inconvenient place to try and attack, genjutsu can be applied to the back of one's skull. Because most information received from the senses is received by the cerebrum's occipital and parietal lobes, close contact with it should have a greater affect on you."

"How is it more effective?" he asked, trying to absorb what she had just said, only getting a vague grasp on it.

"For genjutsu to work, one often has to trick the primary sensory organ: the eye. But if one has trained their eye hard enough to resist most illusions, some of the more powerful ones can become completely useless against certain opponents," she clarified lightly, the explanation seeming almost automatic, and her mind elsewhere, "Most of the illusion is recognized as information is sent to the brain. But if one attacks the brain directly, information is instantly received and perceived as true, before other parts of your brain can work out what's illusion and what's not."

"Why the back of the head?"

"The parietal lobe—which processes sensory information—and the occipital lobe—which processes visual information—are both located towards the upper back of the head," Sakura continued, "Attack those directly, and your opponent should be unsuspectingly thrown

into a genjutsu without being able to do much about it. It's a stronger attack, and because of that, few people are able to break from it. Conversely, because the back of the head is difficult to gain access to, it is a generally unused practice."

This made sense; genjutsu users were generally long-range type attackers, and tended not to go too close to their opponents. People who would manage to get a clear shot of the back of the head were usually ninjutsu or taijutsu users. But the effects of close range genjutsu were something he hadn't even heard about. But despite its rarity, Sasuke realized the importance, and the dangers of it. Few people could escape such a powerful genjutsu—few...but that meant that some people had managed it. If he could break free of it...if he could manage to escape an attack that was directly to his brain, then...

"If you can get out of a genjutsu attack that was aimed at your head..." he started, voicing his thoughts—something he seldom did, "Then you can escape any genjutsu attack, correct?"

"In theory, yes. But there are some kekkei genkai genjutsu that are impossible to get out of because of the genetic specializations," she replied lightly, "Other than those, everything else should be easy to get out of. Anyways, with your permission, I'd like to try it on you. Just to see the effects."

He paused for a moment—a powerful genjutsu attack. The most powerful one he had succumbed to in the past, he had been unable to break out of. The Mangekyou Sharingan—the most dangerous aspect of his clan's special doujutsu, one of the mentioned bloodline genjutsu that was impossible to break out of. But it was Sakura who was going to put this genjutsu on him, not Itachi.

"I trust you."

After a month and a half of darkness, the sight of a wide-open field surprised him. The grasses were a lush green, the sky an uncanny

hue of blue; all around him, cheer and happiness seemed to jump out at him in the forms of colour.

"Sasuke?"

Sakura's voice was no longer coming from everywhere, but was projected from a spot behind him. Turning he saw the petal-pink locks, those bright viridian eyes, but she appeared to him in the form of a child. Her hair was not restrained by the leaf headband that he was used to, but rather that red ribbon that she wore when they were children; and as she realized that he was looking at her, that radiant smile crossed her face.

She walked over to him and it was as she approached that he realized that his mind had been misled so that he too was in a child's body. He reached out his hand to her and she met it with hers, their palms touching, and fingers outstretched. She felt real, looked real, sounded real.

"I guess it worked," she said happily, smiling at him, "You *can* see me, right?"

"Aa," he replied, looking at their small hands before them.

"You don't realize how strange that sounds coming from you as you look now," she said, her smile fading slightly, replaced with a disapproving frown.

He shrugged lightly, dropping his hand away from hers, and looking out over the field. The location seemed familiar, like a place from a dream, or a forgotten memory.

"Where are we?" he asked her after a moment.

"I don't know," she said, coming up beside him, following his gaze over the horizon, "I made it up off the top of my head."

"You couldn't have," he told her, frowning deeply, "It wouldn't seem familiar if you did."

"You have a weakness in your genjutsu defense then," she replied, sitting down on the grass, toying with the red ribbon in her hair, "A powerful enough genjutsu can influence other parts of the brain that are associated with memory. False memories can be deadly,"

Something jolted within him at this new information that she had given him. His mind registered two things at once. One was that if he had parts of his memory missing, as he did now, and if he was susceptible to false memories, he would be very vulnerable to attacks. What if Orochimaru knew about implanting false memories? He could use it against him if he ever wanted to hunt down the young Uchiha. False information, false locations, false names—all could result in dangerous situations because he had no other memories to conflict with, or correct the implanted ones.

The second thought was the realization that Sakura possessed the ability to cast a powerful genjutsu on him, one powerful enough so that he believed that this world was from his memories.

"Well, I guess that answers any questions I had on the influence genjutsu would have on you," Sakura stated mellowly, "I'll dispel it now."

"Wait."

He found himself speaking without even thinking of it, baffling both Sakura and himself at the same time. He looked over the green field—a place that seemed so real, yet it was an illusion; the very sensation of sight wasn't real. It was entirely deceptive—he was blind, he shouldn't forget that, but...

"Sasuke," Sakura said after a moment, her voice gentle, "It's not real. As much as you might want believe that you can see this, you can't forget how things really are. Don't lose yourself to an illusion."

He grunted in response, but did not turn his illusionary vision from the scene, imprinting the scene on his memory until the very last moment when he woke on the ground, with Sakura kneeling over him, the rock digging into his back, and the world—black.

A/N: The Emo Prince nickname came from a deviantart picture comparing Vincent Valentine from FFVII (Emo King) and Sasuke (Emo Prince). The link will be at the top of my profile page for anyone who wants to see it! It's very funny, and I couldn't resist nicknaming Sasuke that :3 (Just to specify, I *didn't* draw it.)

Sorry if the technicalities of the brain confused anybody; I just wanted to make it seem more believable to those who do know what I'm talking about. Also shows Sasuke a bit of what Sakura's been doing in the time he's been gone.

Sorry about length—super long chapter right now; longest yet. Sorry if it killed some of you, but the only appropriate places to cut it off were too short.

Please review!

Chapter 18

A/N: Sorry this took so long to post guys. Been busy all evening and then I've had difficulty with the online course application for my school. Which sucks 'cause it's annoying. But it's finally here! For people who are keen on English: **Symbolism Alert!** There are some very important symbols in this chapter, and if you can interpret them correctly, you may gain some insight as how things are going to go. Good luck! I'm thinking as a bonus on the last chapter of this story (whenever that may be) I'll add a little segment at the bottom recapping all the symbols in the story, and their interpretive meanings. Let me know if you think I should.

Writing the following scene made me cry. Is it normal to possess a maternal instinct for non-existent characters who have lives that suck? It happens to me *a lot*, and more for Sasuke than any other character has for me. I've adopted him as my son: it's official. First part is just a snapshot, the following part takes place later that day.

Just a note on the last chapter: In the genjutsu, they both appeared as children. Why? Because I wanted to make it that way :p And because it hasn't really crossed Sakura's mind that Sasuke hasn't seen her as she is now.

Chapter Eighteen: Trial

He stood before the door, his hands shaking as he pushed it open before him, knowing what lay beyond, yet hoping against hope that it he was wrong. His heart was beating so hard that his head throbbed with the very action; his stomach was clenching so tightly that when he brushed the handle on the door, his stomach seemed to sharply cease to exist— just an empty hole full of pain where it had been. His small hand turned the handle slowly and the door groaned open loudly in protest, a sickly stench meeting his nose.

Blood.

The disturbingly black moon cast wisps of dark gray moonlight on the floor from the window. Where the moonbeams were splattered on the floor, lay a dark heap; the dim light was not the only thing spilled on the floor. Dark stains stood out against the unnatural lighting, wreathing the undistinguishable pile in a grotesque frame. Though he could not see what the heap was, he did not need to see it to know what it was.

Taking a few cautious steps, nausea rose with each footfall; he knew what was waiting in that room for him, and even though he did not want to enter, he could not stop himself from moving forward. The door closed behind him once he was far within the reaches of the room, the deadly stench of blood rising beyond the sickening point. The sky was just visible beyond the glass panes of the windows, and was glowing a crimson red, where black clouds sped across at an alarming speed—yet none passed over the face of the black moon.

He choked out a sob as he could finally discern the figures lying in the patch of moonlight. Long strands of black hair was splayed out on the wood; fabric was wrinkled and stained; limbs were crumpled—the bodies had already been devoid of life before they fell to the floor—folding uselessly beneath the forms. His mother's face was hidden from view, but he could imagine a soundless scream fixed on her death-stiffened face, eyes wide and pleading. His father lay on the far side, away from him, the neat tie that held back his long hair was loose and his hair was matted with blood.

"...Kaa-san..." he sobbed as he knees met the floor hard, "...Dou-san..."

He threw himself to the floor and cried then, his grief beyond description, his trauma piercing his body, mind and soul. They were dead. All of them. All dead. His aunt, his uncle, his friends, his neighbors—his mother and father. And he was alive—the only one.

' *Why?!'* he screamed the question over and over in his head. Why was he the only one alive? Why, why, why? He hit the floor with his tiny fist, hoping the pain would ease his suffering, but it did not. He wished he was dead—he would rather be dead than come home to this. He wished he was the one who had died; he would rather be the one dead instead of all of them, than being the only one left living.

He was not alone in the room, he knew this—he did not have to look up to know that someone else was present. He did not have to hear any noise, there was someone there: the only other one alive. His fist clenched tighter, and he inhaled raggedly, dragging himself wretchedly into a sitting position, meeting the gaze that punctured out of the darkness.

Red eyes—eyes that belonged to *him* , belonged to Itachi, his elder brother, his clan's murderer—that was what Sasuke saw standing over his parents' bodies. The tomoe within the Sharingan eyes were merged into the pupil, and he knew he should look away from those deadly eyes, but could not.

An emotion of such violence and rage caused him to tremble as he stared at those eyes. Hatred. That was what burned deep within his soul, blacker than the moon that hung in the sky outside, blacker than the dark stains of blood on the floor. But while there was hatred within him, he found himself trembling, fear gripped him as well.

"Why?!" he shouted out at his brother's silent form, unable to keep the sob from escaping him, "Why did you kill them?!"

The eyes blinked once slowly in the darkness, and the form took a step forward; inadvertently, he found himself flinching backwards in response. A shuriken flew from the shadows suddenly, whistling by his ear and cutting deeply into his left shoulder. The pain was nothing compared to injuries in the past, the stinging blood running over him hardly worth mentioning, yet he crumpled on the floor again, sobbing. Why? Why did it have to hit his shoulder? Why

hadn't he thrown it at his heart? It would have been much more welcomed; he didn't want to stay there, laying the floor, crying, breathing, living. He would much rather have been dead on that floor with his parents.

"For the next twenty-four hours..."

He snapped his head up instantly, fear reaching up and seizing his soul with an icy claw. His pupils contracted in terror, and he shuffled as far away as he could away from his brother. But no matter what, he did not seem to get any farther away.

"No!" he yelled out, tears running down his eight-year-old face.

"...you will witness me murdering our clan..."

"NO!" he screamed out desperately; he found he could not shut his eyes, nor break the gaze.

"...over and over again."

He could not brace himself for the worst, he could not prepare himself for what he knew was coming—and right when he felt his heart would stop, he heard something. It was distant at first, but it grew louder with each passing moment. His eyes were locked with Itachi's but he could see behind his brother, a figure emerged from the darkness, seemingly haloed in light.

The sound was coming from the figure that was approaching, and the world around him seemed to stop. The sound was a tune—a familiar song that he had heard many times, and the figure was singing it quietly, but in his ears it echoed loudly. They were singing that song, the song that his mother had used as a lullaby for him, but the figure could not be his mother; the corpse on the floor confirmed as much.

As the figure stepped daintily from the shaft of light that had appeared from the darkest corner of the room, the world around him

shattered into a million of tiny dark shards, the pieces of his brother's face becoming mingled with the others, and disappearing from view. Only he and the figure remained in the void they hovered in, the shards fading away to nothing, leaving them alone.

Tears of relief spilled over his face as the figure smiled gently at him. To him, she appeared like an angel of light in the deepest hells of his mind; she had to be the most beautiful angel he had ever seen. The only one in fact; the other was sprawled lifeless on the floor. Her eyes were a field-green and sparkled with love and tenderness; tendrils of cherry blossom-pink hair framed her beautiful face, softening her appearance; and the smile that shone on her face made her seem radiant in his eyes.

Approaching him, she knelt down and encompassed him in a protective embrace, the song in her melodic voice never breaking as he clung tightly to her. His tiny arms were wrapped around her waist securely, his small hands clutching the fabric of her red dress. The sound vibrated in his ears as he cried quietly; she was here, holding him close to her, and he knew she would not let go—she would keep him safe.

"...Sakura."

This was the way that she always warded his nightmares away—he knew he would wake up in her arms again the next day. And in all honesty, he was glad.

Sakura lay on the grass, looking up at the cloudless blue sky, the July sunshine dappling the earth in a warm glow. Sitting calmly next to where she was lying down, was Sasuke; turning her head slightly, she looked at him and smiled. He was sitting with one leg bent at the knee, where one of his arms was draped over it lazily. The other leg was stretched out on the ground, while his other right hand was playing with the grass.

The two of them were taking a break from their morning exercises, and were spending that free time enjoying the summer sun. She couldn't help but grin at the conversation that had led up to the break—of course Sasuke didn't want to take a break, he wanted to train, but she marveled at how the mere suggestion of a new method in exchange for a break could quickly change his mind.

"When are we going to get back to work?" he asked her after another few minutes of silence.

Sakura reached out to him and took the hand that was idly pulling the grass out of the ground, the action of brushing the back of his hand with her thumb having become an automatic habit. She squeezed his hand slightly, an action that would have been considered a forbidden form of affection a couple months previous, but had grown to become an acceptable gesture.

"You're so impatient, Sasuke," she told him lightly, "It's a nice day, can't you just enjoy it, if even for a moment?"

"I have been," he told her bluntly, ignoring her hand, "But I want to get back to work."

She rolled on to her side so that she could more easily face him, and just gave a mellow smile, "You're much less pleasant to be around when you're obsessing over training—you get impatiently and grouchy. And when you get grouchy, you start denying things."

"No, I don't," he retorted in an almost indignant tone.

She laughed, "See? There you go."

He gave a noncommittal grunt and she giggled quietly to herself. There was another period of silence and Sakura let the sun warm her back, knowing that her shoulders and legs would probably get sunburned worse—they had become quiet red over the last month, but she didn't really mind, applying a lotion helped sooth the burning, and the prospect of skin cancer was years away. She closed her

eyes and listened to the birds sing, trying for a moment to experience the world from Sasuke's perspective.

"You didn't answer my question," she said Uchiha spoke up again, interrupting her tranquil state.

"I know I didn't," she replied with a mischievous grin on her face.

"It's unfair to say you're going to teach me a new technique after a break and then make the break last all day," Sasuke said impatiently.

"It won't last all day. You should listen to yourself, you sound just like Naruto did when we were kids, so eager to learn a new jutsu or to accomplish a difficult mission," she replied smiling nostalgically to herself, "And you know the routine, I don't usually request breaks anyways. We're actually waiting for someone."

"Waiting for someone?" he echoed, but not saying anything more. The silence was enough to suggest that he was ordering her to explain.

"Before I can train you in the new method, I want to see how well your fighting skills have become," she explained lightly, letting the smell of the grass fill her nostrils, "I got a couple of people lined up to fight you this morning. Depending on how that goes, I either will or will not teach you the new technique."

"You've fought me," he emphasized, and she opened one eye to peer at his expression, "You should know how I fight."

"That's precisely why I want someone else to fight you," she replied, opening both eyes and pulling herself into a sitting position, "In your current state, you can't hope to beat me on your basic senses, but your basic senses have gotten you pretty far. I don't know how far, because I'm skilled enough not to be defeated by you. I want to know which skill level you *can* defeat."

"When is my opponent expected to arrive?" he sounded grouchy still; she smiled good-naturedly at his attitude, he was irritated at having her mention that he couldn't beat her.

"In about ten more minutes," she replied, feeling the back of her head for any grass that might have caught itself in her hair, "There's plenty of time, but not enough time to train."

"A strategically placed break," he muttered to himself and she smiled despite herself.

"Okay, stop dwelling on it," she reprimanded playfully, "Let's talk about something else."

"Like what?"

"Your birthday's soon," she said conversationally, "The twenty-third if I recall correctly."

He tensed slightly, a trace of confusion passing over his face, "How did you know that?"

She smiled in amusement at his reaction, and squeezed his hand, "It was printed on all the medical files at the hospital. It was blaring out at me the whole time you were recovering; I just decided to keep that little piece of information in mind. But that's not the point. What do you want to do for your birthday?"

"It doesn't matter," he replied evenly, "It has never been an important day for me."

"Oh come on, Sasuke," she frowned in disapproval, "You don't turn seventeen every day. What do you want to do for your birthday?"

"I said it doesn't matt—"

Sakura pinched his hand lightly in disapproval, "I asked you what you wanted to do for your birthday; can you at least give it a serious thought?"

Sasuke tilted his head downward in consideration, and she frowned slightly at this behaviour. Surely it wasn't so hard to think of what one wanted for their birthday. But he had also said that it had never been important to him before—sadness pooled in the pit of her stomach. It probably wasn't an important day because he had never had anyone to spend it with for the longest time. She didn't recall him ever mentioning his birthday when they were genin—but it would have been during the Chuunin Exam, so he was most likely busy training anyways.

"I suppose if I want to do anything..." he started; Sakura's interest piqued and she peered intently at him.

"Yes?"

"I want to go on a mission," he finished after her prompt.

Sakura smiled softly at him, even though he couldn't see it. "I'll see what I can do," she told him tenderly, doing her best to portray her expression through voice.

Sasuke suddenly grabbed a weapon from his pouch and threw it at the foliage of the nearest tree, a dark frown appearing swiftly on his face. Sakura herself was stunned for a split second, until she heard the panicked shout from behind the tree's leaves. There was another shout, but this one was indignant; after a moment, two figures dropped down from the branches, causing Sakura to frown in displeasure as well.

"Oi! Teme, that was uncalled for!" Naruto shouted at the glowering Uchiha, waving a fist unnecessarily.

"I would think that eavesdropping merits it appropriate," Sasuke replied coldly, a glare cast in Naruto's direction.

"Yeah, well watch where you're throwing those things next time—" Naruto blurted out, then caught himself, "Er, I mean, look out before yo—I mean, don't throw them blindly—ack, I...uh..."

"Naruto," Sakura stated sharply, glaring almost worse than Sasuke was, "Stop talking. Now."

Naruto promptly shut his mouth and fidgeted nervously. He seemed to find the combination of Sasuke's trademark glare and Sakura's own deadly glare a little disquieting. Deciding to change the topic of conversation, he indicated to the other figure present.

"Sasuke almost hit this guy here," he said after a second, "I brought him just like you asked me, Sakura-chan. Iruka-sensei says he's the best this year."

Sakura turned a friendly smile to the other person, dropping the glare which she had previously fixed on Naruto. There was nothing particularly special about this person, save that he was eleven, if not twelve, years old. Yesterday when she had been out shopping, she had stopped by the Academy on her way home to ask to borrow Iruka-sensei's best student, promising not to damage him too badly. While Sakura was out doing this, Sasuke was spending time with Naruto, Kiba and Lee—of course Sasuke wanted to train, but Sakura pointed out that the fridge did not fill itself and that she felt that he needed to spend time with his friends. Being isolated from people was not psychologically healthy, and it kind of showed in Sasuke, who had been isolated and alone for most of his life.

"I don't know why you had me bring him to the training grounds, you're not exactly training," Naruto commented, putting his arms behind his head, then he cast a small sly smile at the both of them, "If you wanted to be alone to hold hands, you could have found a private place in town."

Inner Sakura did the rare thing and seeped visibly to show on outer Sakura's face; the glare she had given the loud-mouthed ninja earlier increased tenfold in intensity. Naruto took a step back, and Sakura's embarrassed blush only seemed to make her appear more menacing. Meanwhile Sasuke was scowling quietly beside her.

"Stop acting like an idiot," he spat, his grip on Sakura's hand increasing slightly. Inner Sakura faltered slightly as she speculated whether it was out of anger or if it was just a self-conscious reflex.

"I was just kidding," Naruto babbled nervously.

After glowering for a moment longer in his best friend's general direction, Sasuke stood up abruptly and turned his head towards Sakura, "Are we going to get this fight over with or not?"

Getting to her own feet, she shook her head slightly at his impatience before turning to the young Academy student, "What's your name?"

"Hyuuga Ikane," the boy replied taking a confident step forwards.

"You want me to fight an Academy student?" Sasuke raised an eyebrow in her direction.

"Yeah," Sakura replied lightly, "That's the plan."

"I might end up killing him," Sasuke replied evenly and out of the corner of her eye, Sakura saw Naruto give her an incredulous look. Hyuuga Ikane looked hardly perturbed.

"That's why you aren't allowed to use ninjutsu or genjutsu," Sakura told him sternly. She had little doubt that he could defeat a child, but the best student was usually the equivalent of a genin, and she toyed with the idea of Sasuke fighting one. His blindness versus a genin—she honestly had no idea how that fight would turn out.

"You underestimate me, Sakura," he told her grouchily, sounding insulted by the mere fact that she thought he could not defeat an Academy student.

"No," she retorted, "I don't know *how* to estimate you. Defeat this boy, then you fight a genin afterwards. Defeat the genin and I'll teach you the new technique."

"Sakura-chan, do you think this fight is really fair?" Naruto cast her a uncertain glance, clearly worried for the young Hyuuga boy.

"Don't worry, Naruto-kun!" Ikane stated arrogantly, thinking that Naruto's concern was for Sasuke, "I won't hurt him too much."

"Let's get this over with," Sasuke said coldly, and Sakura bit her lip anxiously—Sasuke was mature enough not to lose his cool over something some loud-mouthed kid uttered...right?

Taking Sasuke's arm, she led him out into the middle of a trap-free clearing, noting his slightly irked mood. She knew he was not one to take arrogance from others lightly, and she also know that he did not like children, but he wouldn't actually kill the boy.

"Try not to injure him—I promised Iruka-sensei I would return him relatively undamaged," she whispered to him, giving his arm a quick squeeze before stepping away.

"Hn," he smirked slightly in response.

Sasuke had paid close attention to where the boy was moving as they walked out to the field to fight. The boy was a Hyuuga, and had to be considered with a certain degree of caution, even if he was an Academy student—if he could use the Byakuugan already, it could prove to be a very difficult fight; Sakura had made no indication that doujutsu was not permitted. Well, if the boy could use the Byakuugan, he could easily use his speed to avoid it.

"You guys can start now, you know," Sakura called impatiently from his right, but he ignored it—he was going to wait for a weakness before attacking the boy. Rushing blindly—quite literally—at him would most definitely be a mistake, one that he wasn't going to make.

There was another period of silence as the wind blew through the area; Naruto was oddly quiet—perhaps he had finally learned to

keep his mouth shut while other people were fighting. Sakura was quiet also, but he wasn't surprised, she had always had the sense to stay quiet when she knew she should—one of the things he *hadn't* found annoying about her when they were kids.

Ahead of him, the kid shifted his weight ever so slightly to the left, his foot crunching on the hard earth. Sasuke immediately took up a defensive stance, and the boy instantly stopped moving—most likely surprised at Sasuke's reaction to his movement. The kid wasn't stupid, he acknowledged with slight annoyed amusement, but he wasn't Orochimaru's selected vessel for nothing—while that wasn't the best way to boast about skill, it was true, and Orochimaru didn't exactly pick the weakest ninja. Having noted that, he knew that he would have to somehow lower the guard of Hyuuga Ikane.

"Kid," he spoke out after a moment, trying to sound casual, "Tell me what you hope to accomplish by becoming a ninja."

After a pause, seeming to deem the question innocent enough, the boy replied. "I want to be Hokage someday," he responded with conceit and a touch of Naruto's enthusiasm.

"Aa," Sasuke noted evenly, pinpointing the boy's exact location, rethinking his strategy, "A noble dream—but many wish to become Hokage, what makes you think that you will one day attain that dream?"

He heard Naruto begin to utter what sounded like a protest, but Sasuke lifted his hand to stop him. He needed the boy distracted—if the boy's guard was off, maybe he could initiate an offensive and have this fight over in minutes. If the fight was over sooner, he could get the fight against the genin over with, thereby having Sakura teach him the new technique. He couldn't waste any more time just training as he was—even though his other senses had become almost supernaturally keen, he knew that he could not rely on that alone. This new technique, whatever it was, he hoped would cause him to get better still—he needed to defeat Itachi at all costs.

"I'm the best in my year," the boy replied with that haughty tone in his voice—were all Hyuuga males so arrogant? "And I am different from my other classmates."

His lip curled slightly as he recognized some of his own youthful overconfidence in the boy's speech—he too had once claimed to be 'different' than the rest. But dark thoughts filled the back of his mind, as he recalled the consequences of being different. It was because he was different that Orochimaru had sought him out; being different had cost him so much.

"I advise you to be cautious then, Hyuuga Ikane," he replied seriously, having already devised a plan in the corner of his mind. He tensed ever so slightly in preparation to spring, "Those who are different are often targeted because of their skill—and when that happens, you will be in trouble."

With that final statement he launched himself forward towards the boy, running directly towards where the child stood. A gasp came from the boy as his attack had the desired effect of surprise. There was a rustle of cloth—hand signs, slow hand signs.

"Byakuugan!" the young Hyuuga cried, but Sasuke did not stop.

There was more rustling—the boy was trying to attack back, or defend himself; it sounded like a forward strike. His training with Sakura told him that by the movement of the cloth, and the foot movements he could hear, the forward strike was the most convenient attack. He reached out and grabbed with his right hand while his left hand went to his kunai pouch. Successfully seizing the boy's wrist, he took a short step forward, twisting the small arm around so that it was behind the back. While he was twisting the arm, he brought the kunai around and held it at the throat, just below the chin.

The boy seemed shocked, as he didn't move at all, but froze in place. There was a gust of wind that blew through the clearing as no one spoke. The boy's arm muscles tensed slightly in his grasp—

Sasuke pressed the kunai against the tiny neck; the boy was thinking of escape. Of course he wouldn't kill the boy, but he was foolish to think he could still win at this point.

"This fight is over," he stated bluntly, and after a moment, Sakura gave out a call that was in agreement with the words he had just uttered.

Dropping the boy's arm, he put the kunai back in his pouch, motioning for Sakura to come over and take his arm. The fight had been way too easy—it insulted him that she thought he couldn't defeat a mere student.

"Thank you, Ikane," Sakura said in a pleasant tone to the boy who was now standing quietly nearby.

"How could he beat me?!" he whined loudly at Sakura—putting Naruto's own whining skills to shame, "He's blind!"

He cast a glare in the brat's direction, becoming extremely irritated. "You have a loud mouth, you are slow, and overconfident."

The boy promptly shut his mouth and he heard Naruto give a shout of protest. "Sasuke, that was way too harsh," his best friend shouted at him, but he merely shrugged.

"That was a little out of line, Sasuke," Sakura told him reproachfully; he supposed it was, but that didn't make it any less true, "He's still growing, you know."

"He won't grow if he hasn't learned anything from this experience," he replied, evenly, ignoring both of their statements, "If he learns, then maybe one day he can begin to hope to be Hokage."

There was a quietness that followed his words and he knew that Sakura and Naruto were probably both unhappy with him for criticizing the boy so callously. He gave a light shrug; he didn't care, he just wanted to get on to the next fight.

"When is the genin to arrive?" he asked Sakura, choosing not to pay attention to his teammates' behaviour.

"First thing after lunch," Sakura replied with a sigh, before turning her head and speaking in Naruto's direction, "Naruto, can you take Ikane back to the Academy and tell Iruka-sensei thank you?"

"Sure thing, Sakura-chan," Naruto replied cheerfully, but Sasuke knew that the blonde-haired boy would probably give him a talking to the next chance available, "Oi, Sakura-chan, Sasuke! It's almost lunch now, you should stop for now, you know? Come to Ichiraku's with me!"

"How does that sound Sasuke?" Sakura asked him pleasantly. While Naruto would probably take the opportunity to berate him on crushing the young Hyuuga's dream or something like that. However there was nothing else to be done; the genin would show up after lunch, and seeing as it was lunch right now, Sakura would probably make him stop for lunch anyways.

"Sure," he replied and Sakura gave a small pause, as if she was surprised at his consent. He just shrugged lightly, letting her lead him towards Naruto, the quieted Hyuuga following dolefully behind them.

Sakura watched the fight that was taking place before her with mild interest. While Sasuke had no trouble at all with the Academy student, Hyuuga Ikane, he was having a little more difficulty with Konohamaru. Well, more difficulty in the sense that the fight wasn't being ended nearly as quickly as the other one, and Konohamaru actually had a chance to attack.

He was attacking Sasuke as well as he could, but he could not land a single hit on the Uchiha, and naturally this was frustrating the genin to no end. Sasuke on the other hand was almost provoking the boy, leaving an opening and then blocking it at the last moment. Sakura had no idea what he was trying to accomplish by this, but was watching with satisfaction that his previous skill, combined with him

being almost completely accustomed to his blindness, that he could fight well enough for him to learn the method she was planning on teaching him.

Konohamaru gave a loud shout as he tried punch Sasuke in the face, but the Uchiha caught this fist in his hand and pushed it to the side, redirecting the momentum of the blow. As Konohamaru's victorious shout turned into a loud cry of surprise, Sasuke neatly grabbed the small ankle that was passing by and pulled the boy downwards onto the ground, where he planted a foot on the complaining boy's back.

"Get off me, you big buffoon!" Konohamaru was shouting, pounding his fists on the ground and kicking his legs wildly, "Let me try again and I'll beat the crap out of you!"

An amused smirk passed over both Sasuke's and Sakura' lips as the boy continued to flail and shout; she couldn't say for Sasuke, but she herself was strongly reminded of Naruto.

"Okay, okay," she said stepping forward, "The fight is over, Konohamaru, sorry. And Sasuke, you've made your point—you don't have to toy with him like that."

Sasuke took his foot off of Konohamaru's back, giving a small 'tch' sound; but a victorious smirk decorated his lips regardless. She smiled slightly at his behaviour—a win against a mildly challenging opponent must be a nice break. After Konohamaru had picked himself up off the ground, still complaining, Sakura took two bills from her kunai pouch.

"Thanks for taking on this mission, Konohamaru," she said kindly, "Here's a tip to add to your pay."

"Thanks, Sakura-nee-chan," the boy took the bill from her and shoved it in his pockets. He paused a moment before whirling and confronting Sasuke in a Naruto-like manner, "You just wait, Uchiha!

Someday I'm gonna be the sixth Hokage and then I'll be able to beat you so easily that you won't even have a chance to blink!"

Sasuke shrugged, looking slightly amused by the mere notion, but said nothing. Sakura on the other hand turned and shooed the boy off, "Say hello to Moegi and Udon, will you?"

"Sure thing, Sakura-nee-chan," the boy replied brightly; he cast a distrustful glance at Sasuke before running off.

"Well, you pass," she said to Sasuke brightly, "And you've shown me that not only can you defeat a genin with ease, you can actually go out of your way to lead them on."

He gave a light shrug, "Alright, I've passed. What were you going to teach me?"

Sakura smiled; typical Sasuke, getting right to the point as usual. "It's something that can be practiced in town, so I'll tell you about it on our way back."

She approached him and linked her arm with his, leading him back towards the village, "Most people talk about the five senses, sight, sound, touch, taste and smell—but there are actually two other senses that can be added to that list. The one is a sub-sense: balance. The other is what is most commonly known as the sixth sense. The sixth sense is actually the detection of chakra signatures."

They walked leisurely down the familiar road that they took to get back to Konoha, the gentle breeze sweeping gently through the trees; the path was well worn and not too rough, Sasuke getting by the rough patches easily, having grown accustomed to various surfaces. It had been worse when they had first come down this path, having almost fallen a number of times on the rough parts, but she was always there to make sure that he didn't actually fall.

"The sixth sense is often confused with the presence of spirits and such because people who are not ninja don't know anything about chakra. Most people who swear that they've sensed a ghost most likely have sensed someone's chakra signature somewhere nearby," she explained cheerfully, looking up at the leafy canopies of the trees, none of the leaves jarring loose, "When people walk through graveyards, they are usually frightened and wary, picking up on their own chakra signatures more readily, and that's why many say they can sense presences there. You'll find that if you are unafraid to walk through a graveyard, you won't be aware of your own chakra signature—most people are used to its presence and can't tell it's there."

As they walked along the path, Sakura took in some of the natural beauties that were around them—Inner Sakura making note of them while outer Sakura continued the explanation without faltering. There was a shrub of chrysanthemum flowers growing on the side of the road, and in the underbrush there were snails and slugs crawling slowly in the dampness. A cicada was chirping somewhere nearby and faded away as they grew farther from it.

"That is the entire reasoning behind the sensing of spirits—some people are more sensitive chakra by nature, like myself, while others have to search for it. Being able to detect chakra at will is very helpful, however most ninja mask their chakra exceptionally well—but nobody is capable of completely hiding their chakra signatures because chakra is used to hide it, so there is always some trace of it," Sakura told him, watching as a small snake slithered out from the underbrush and crossed the path some ways ahead, "It requires damn good chakra control, but with practice, any chakra signature can be detected."

She watched the snake slither gracefully and surreptitiously on the path, coming up to a leaf lying on the ground, and passing over it, crushing it beneath the slender body. From the underbrush, a small weasel was eyeing the small reptile with interest, its eyes glinting.

"For the next week, we're going to cut back on taijutsu and ninjutsu training; I am going to have you practice focusing your chakra. Hopefully by the end of that week, you'll be able to detect many chakra signatures that you couldn't before," she explained further, Sasuke merely listening to her words and nodding at places to show he understood, "Guarding your chakra signature is second nature to ninja, and most of them have it masked at all times. You have yours masked and I have mine masked—but I'm going to lower it slightly so that you will have a better time of detecting it."

The weasel dashed out from its hiding spot, scampering across the path, and snatched the snake up off the road, the sharp teeth digging into the writhing body. Taking its prize to the wayside, the weasel promptly bit into the flesh of the snake, tearing the head off. The gates of the village lay just ahead, and as they approached them, she waved happily hello to the men on duty. Even though she had probably delivered hundreds of letters to them from Tsunade, she could never for the life of her remember their names.

"The desired end result should be that you are able to detect where your opponent is at all times, no matter where they are. Of course you'll only be able to detect to a certain range, but people shouldn't be able to get close to you without you knowing before hand—whether it's from above or below, behind, or dead ahead," she finished as they passed through the open gates.

"Why don't people usually use this to detect their opponents?" he asked her after a moment of absorbing her words.

"You have to be able to control your chakra just above ANBU level," she replied evenly, walking the familiar path back to the Uchiha manor, "Most ANBU have difficulty with it, and because of that, it's generally unused. But you are talented, Sasuke, I strongly believe that you can pull it off. Your other senses have become ridiculously enhanced—you hear things better, you are more sensitive with touch, you comment on things being too sweet or salty and I don't know what you're talking about. You can smell meals when you're in the bedroom, but when you make something, I can't smell it until I go

into the living room. Your chakra senses haven't been lazing around doing nothing—they've most likely become more sensitive as well."

"Why didn't you teach me this earlier?" he asked her, a confused frown descending upon his face.

"It's easy to start to rely too heavily on chakra," she told him as they turned the corner into the old Uchiha neighbourhood, "I wanted you to be able to rely on all your senses equally."

"Aa."

She smiled warmly, as they came up to the main gate—the lock had been replaced and Sakura now had a key for it; they were no longer required to jump over it. After closing the gate behind them, she took his hand instead of his arm, brushing the back affectionately, and led him towards the back yard.

"Come on, let's start focusing your chakra."

A/N: Okay, that chapter took me *forever* . But it's finally finished. Now that I've got all the types of training down, it won't be mentioned as much. I've totally been neglecting Sasuke's social life—not that he really has one, but Sakura's going to force him to be less antisocial.

Chapter 19

A/N: Well, what to say, what to say. I'd say that all the people who were on the symbolism hunt picked out the most obvious symbols: the snake and the weasel. I'd say about half of you guessed their respective identities correctly, while the other half surprised me on how you interpreted it. I don't want to give away the true meaning of the symbolism, as it *does* reveal some of the plot way down the road, but I'll tell you this: Sasuke does **not** die. That may shed some light on it for some people, but ultimately the snake can still be interpreted as Sasuke or Orochimaru. As for the more subtle symbols, nobody picked those out. :p That's okay though, I'll explain all symbols at the end of the epilogue of this tale (whenever that is.)

Congratulations to those who got the symbols correct (though I can't tell you if you were correct or not because then you'll be all like: "Omg! *That's* going to happen:O"

Chapter Nineteen: A Red Petal on the White Rose

It was because Sasuke asked her that Sakura did not tell anyone that his birthday was coming up, specifically so that he would not be constantly bothered by well-wishers and gift-bearers. But despite the fact, Naruto had once again found out something he wasn't supposed to know, and once again it was through eavesdropping. So of course, knowing Naruto, he went and told everyone that could plausibly care that Sasuke's birthday was on the twenty-third. And it was because of that, when Sasuke and Sakura went on their daily walk around town, he was constantly wished a happy birthday, much to his displeasure. After a while, Sakura could tell that he was beginning to grow rather irritated, especially after he had immediately pinpointed the source of the problem to the correct culprit.

Now as they were walking by the Hokage's tower, he was once again wished a happy birthday by a girl that Sakura didn't even know the name of.

"Who the hell was that?" Sasuke asked her in an irritated tone, as the girl passed them.

Sakura looked once over her shoulder at the girl before leading Sasuke up the stairs to Tsunade's office, "I have no idea—old fangirl maybe?"

"If Naruto knows what's good for him, he'll stay away from me today," Sasuke grumbled hanging onto the railing and Sakura's arm to maintain balance, "I'll kill that dobe for opening his loud mouth."

Somehow Sakura wouldn't be surprised if Sasuke tried to. She smiled in slight amusement as they opened the door to the hall—taking a left and proceeding to the office. True to her word, Sakura was going to get a mission for Sasuke, like he had wanted—that was why they were present at the Hokage's tower. Knocking on the door to Tsunade's office, she waited for a moment to be beckoned to enter.

"Come in," Shizune called from within and Sakura smiled as she opened the door.

"Good afternoon, Shizune-san, Tsunade-sama," Sakura greeted brightly as they entered and after Sasuke entered behind her, she closed the door.

"Sakura! It's been a while since I've seen you," Tsunade smiled in greeting, "I see you've brought Uchiha as well."

Sasuke gave a small respectful nod, but otherwise remained quiet and unmoving. From where she was lying on the floor, Ton Ton the pig stood up and trotted over to Sasuke, and snuffled the floor curiously about his feet. Seeming to meet the pig's approval, she gave a friendly grunt and dashed away again.

"Ah, Sasuke-san, you seemed to have made a friend," Shizune said cheerfully, bending down and patting her pet affectionately, "Ton Ton doesn't usually take kindly to strangers."

"I see," he replied, sounding confused on how he was supposed to respond to this statement.

Sakura was used to this ironic statement that he often emitted, but Tsunade and Shizune looked slightly shocked at his response. Taking advantage of the pause, Sakura decided to put forward her request.

"Tsunade-sama, there was a reason that I came here today to see you," she said to the Godaime, clearing her throat slightly, "I came here so that I could request a mission for Sasuke to complete."

The stunned silence from before dragged out into another stunned silence as both of them turned their gaze to the pink-haired kunoichi.

"A mission?" Tsunade asked finally, seeming to need confirmation that she had heard correctly.

"Yes, a mission," Sakura nodded to emphasize her point, "As you know, I have been training Sasuke to become accustomed to his condition and as a result, he has improved immensely."

"Yes, you mentioned so in last month's report," the Hokage said absently, peering at her pupil perceptively, "But are you sure he's ready to take on the task of a mission?"

"I *am* the one who's training him," she stated confidently, "And I think that Sasuke is ready start working off his 'community service'."

Tsunade laced her fingers together and rested them below her nose—something Sasuke did out of habit as well. Studying the both of them standing before her, she shifted her gaze from Sakura to Sasuke who was standing silently next to his caregiver.

"Uchiha Sasuke?"

"Aa?"

"Do you feel that you are prepared to take on a mission that I will give you?"

"Yes," his reply was firm, and Sakura knew that he had probably wanted to go on a mission for the longest time, and now he was going to make sure that he got one.

"Alright then, if you both consent, then I suppose it's alright," Tsunade said, unlacing her fingers and reaching for a book on her desk.

Cracking open the book she flipped through the pages, stopping on a couple and marking them with sticky notes.

"It's been a while since you've gone on a mission yourself, Sakura," Tsunade commented, pausing in her skimming to look up at her young pupil, "And Naruto's been bothering me for a while about going out on some as well."

A look of surprise passed over Sakura's face as she began to grasp what the Hokage was implying. Somewhere inside her, a small bubble of excitement started to grow; if Tsunade was saying what she thought she was saying... She glanced apprehensively at Sasuke, holding her breath slightly. Sasuke was wearing a somewhat confused expression, like he too was unsure if the Hokage was implying what he thought she was.

"I think it's high time that Team Seven was reunited, don't you?" Tsunade said with a smile before turning back to her book.

A wide smile broke across Sakura's face, a feeling of joy welling up from inside of her. It had been her deepest wish now that Sasuke had returned that Team Seven would get back together, and now Tsunade had just fulfilled that desire without her even having to ask.

To keep herself from giving a loud, joyous outburst, Sakura moved her hand along Sasuke's arm until she grasped his hand. Giving it a squeeze, she watched as Tsunade went back to the pages she had marked.

"Alright you two, I've come up with a number of C-ranked and D-ranked missions you can take on," Tsunade said after a moment, "I'll let you choose."

"D-ranked?" Sasuke said impassively, raising his eyebrows slightly.

"Well, Sasuke," Tsunade looked over at him, a mischievous tone in her voice, "no matter how strong you became while trained by Orochimaru, or how much Sakura has helped restore your skill, you still haven't taken the chuunin exam, and are technically still a genin."

Putting a hand over her mouth, Sakura covered her smile politely—she could tell that Tsunade was having fun pointing that fact out to Sasuke. Next to her, Sasuke growled grumpily and muttered something inaudible under his breath.

"The Chuunin Exam is taking place in the Wind Country this year—but the finals are just now taking place," Tsunade mused lightly, "But I don't think you're quite ready for the Chuunin Exam quite yet. Based on what Sakura has told me about your training progress... you might be able to try for the one in January."

"Where is that one being held?" Sakura asked curiously. The Chuunin Exams had been wandering around now that there was less tension between some of the other countries. Six months after Sasuke had left, it had been held in the Lightning Country, and six months after that in the Earth Country. Sakura herself had taken the exam when it was in the Water Country, and now that she thought about it, she had been in a group of traveling genin with a couple of examiners who were going along to strengthen foreign relations. Mitarashi Anko had been with them on that group, but she had spent

more time with the jounin who were team leaders—becoming good friends with Kakashi.

"It's being held here in Konoha," Tsunade replied flipping to another one of the sticky notes in her book, "It's about our turn to have it here again. The Raikage was slightly displeased—he wanted to have it in his village this time around... Anyways, missions."

"What missions do you have set aside as possibilities?" Sakura asked, getting back on topic.

"Okay, I have for D-missions: picking herbs for the Konoha Pharmacy, Kakashi has been bothering me about having someone washing his summoned hounds, fixing a broken bicycle, a moving job, and lawn mowing," Tsunade recited with amusement; Sakura herself wasn't particularly pleased with the notion of doing D-ranked missions, and she knew Sasuke wouldn't be either. Naruto would definitely complain loudly—he complained when he was sent on C-ranked missions, claiming they were too easy.

"Do you have anything more...difficult?" Sakura ventured, and Tsunade sighed and flipped through her book, putting on the look of mock disappointment.

"Well, I have a C-rank mission," the Hokage stated slowly, her over-dramatized expression unchanging, "A farm outside town is experiencing difficulty with missing livestock."

"That's it?" Sasuke stated, speaking for the first time in a while.

"Missing livestock..." Sakura bit her lip; while it was not a difficult task, the new terrain would be difficult, especially if it was on the more rocky side of the village. With her help he could perhaps manage, but it would be a hard mission for him, however she knew Sasuke wouldn't be pleased with that level of mission. "I am inclined to agree with Sasuke."

"...No? Well, do you think that you could handle a B-ranked mission?" Tsunade asked, looking at the both of them perceptively, "I have one that borders on C-rank. You should be familiar with this kind of mission—especially after your experience in the Wave Country."

"An escort mission?" Sakura replied curiously; memories of Team Seven's first big mission returned to her mind. Traveling for Sasuke wouldn't be too bad, and he could always guard their client if required—a smaller patch of ground to defend was much better than a whole area, hunting for an animal that was eating some livestock.

"We'll take the mission," Sasuke said, and Sakura turned her head towards him; she had confidence in him that he could manage the task, but in all honesty, he was the one who was going on the mission—he had a right to say whether he felt he was up to the job.

"Alright then," Tsunade spoke with a satisfied tone in her voice, marking something down in her book, "Well, he's going to be staying in Konoha for a while, he's a delegate from Kumo, and he needs protection on the way home. I'll provide you with more details when you are to leave, which will be in October."

"Hai," Sakura said dutifully.

"Dismissed," Tsunade stated automatically, waving the both of them off; Sakura turned with Sasuke to leave, when the Hokage called out to her in an afterthought, "Sakura, does this whole incident mean that you're going to start doing missions again?"

Pausing, Sakura cast a smile over her shoulder at the Hokage, "I guess so."

"I see—since Team Seven is reuniting, I guess there's only one more thing left to do," Tsunade replied with a smile, "I was going to graduate you at the end of the year with the other graduates who have completed the five-year program—but I think it's best that you graduate now."

Sakura blinked a couple of times at her teacher, "You mean...?"

"Yes, Sakura," the older woman confirmed without Sakura finishing her statement, "You are no longer my pupil—you are a full fledged medic: my equal."

"Congratulations, Sakura-san!" Shizune exclaimed enthusiastically, seeming just as surprised as Sakura.

"T-Thank-you, Tsuande-sama...I don't know what to say," Sakura found herself stuttering. She had only studied as a medic for three years, yet Tsunade was going to graduate her with the other medics who had complete the entire five years? Tsunade had said that she was the best student—but good enough to graduate at seventeen? If she could recall correctly, that would make her the youngest ninja to graduate from medical school in twenty years.

"Just collect anything that you might have at the hospital and attend the formal ceremony at the end of December. And from October onwards, I expect Team Seven to become a full-time mission group, do you hear?" Tsunade spoke strictly, but a kind expression was on her face.

"We'll do our best," Sakura replied confidently, "Thank you so much, Tsunade-sama!"

"You deserve it," Tsunade waved the two of them off, "Now, you have two months to go prepare for the mission. –Oh, and Sasuke?"

"Aa?"

"Happy birthday."

"Sakura?"

"Hm?" Looking over from where she stood at the counter, the pink-haired kunoichi turned her attention to Sasuke, who was probing

around the fridge with his hand, looking for something.

"We're out of tomatoes too," Sasuke told her, turning his head slightly towards her direction.

She let out a sigh; ever since they had requested a mission from Tsunade a week ago, they had been training extra hard with the chakra senses. It was immensely difficult for him, and even after a few days of focusing chakra, he had only gotten a hint of her chakra signature with the guard slightly lowered. After their request had been put forth, Sakura knew that they only had until the end of September to perfect his senses. With that deadline in front of them, Sasuke had insisted that they train for the rest of the day, despite Sakura saying that it was his birthday and all. Eventually Naruto hunted them down and dragged the both back to village where he treated the both of them to ramen and gave Sasuke a present of what Naruto considered the best kind of instant ramen.

Since then, both of them had been training hard, but just as things stood when they were genin, Sasuke still had trouble getting the perfect precision that was required with controlling chakra. She herself had little difficulty with the chakra control, having acquired a level of chakra control equivalent to that of the Hokage only after a year of training with Tsunade. Of course Sasuke's chakra control was much better than when they were trying to climb trees all those years back—he currently had the standard level of jounin chakra control, but that was not enough to detect fully-masked chakra signatures.

Because of all the time that they had spent with training, Sakura hadn't had any chances to go shopping and the number of items they had run out of had accumulated quickly. Tomatoes were now the eighth addition to her mental shopping list.

"Naruto's coming in a few minutes to take you training," she told Sasuke after a moment's thought to his statement, "I'll go shopping while you two are out."

"Hn," Sasuke replied, closing the fridge door—Sakura was unsure of how to interpret this particular syllable.

The day after Sasuke's birthday, Naruto had received a scroll from Tsunade informing him on the Team's resemblance, and had promptly come to the house at the crack of dawn to express his enthusiasm. After that, he had insisted on training with Sasuke too, seeing as they were now a team again, and after what seemed like hours of Naruto's pestering, Sakura had finally relented. She had later pulled Naruto aside and privately told him not to go too hard on Sasuke—they may be able to go on a B-ranked mission, but Sasuke only just above the genin level. Today was the first day that Naruto would be going out training with his best friend.

There was a knocking at the back door and Sakura put down the pen she had been using to write her shopping list, running to go answer it. Behind her she could hear Sasuke following unhurriedly; ahead of her, the banging on the door was getting more and more insistent.

"I'm coming, Naruto!" she shouted down the hall, "Stop banging on the door! You'll break it down!"

The banging on the door ceased and Sakura pried it open with an irritated look on her face as she glared at the blue-eyed boy, who flinched slightly. However Naruto wasn't one to stay perturbed long, and quickly got over Sakura's intimidating appearance.

"You took forever to open the door, Sakura-chan! I'm surprised that you weren't crawling to it or something," he complained, then turned his head towards Sasuke as the said Uchiha came up behind Sakura, "You ready to go training, Sasuke?"

"Aa," he remarked, making his way past Sakura and slipping on his shoes—something that he used to have difficulty with, but no longer.

Reaching out, Sakura grabbed his wrist and when he turned to her—wordlessly inquiring was wrong, she bit her lip slightly, "Be careful; don't overwork yourself—you have a problem with that. Be careful on

the path, and stay close to Naruto's voice, which shouldn't be hard seeing as he talks *all* the time."

"Oi, Sakura-chan, I don't talk *that* much! And don't you think you're worrying a little *too* much? Sasuke's gonna be fine," Naruto remarked lazily, putting his arms behind his head, giving her a irritated look from being told he spoke a great deal.

She let out another sigh, knowing that Naruto was probably right; but this was going to be one of the first times that Sasuke was going to spend an extended period of time away from her—she couldn't help herself by being a little anxious, "Just take care of yourself."

"I will," Sasuke told her, sliding his wrist through her hand until his hand joined with hers. He held her hand for a moment longer before turning towards his best friend, "Let's go, Naruto."

Releasing her hand, he turned and departed from the back door; she watched them go, feeling a little agitated that Naruto would be too hard on Sasuke, but she figured he'd be fine for the most part. As they walked around the corner to the front yard, she could already tell they were bickering among themselves. Shaking her head slightly from side to side, she headed back inside the house to search for the shopping list she had been making that morning.

"Do you sense that?" Sakura asked him for what seemed like the hundredth time that afternoon.

He opened his mouth to give the irritated and usual response of 'no', when he found himself stopping. On the edge of his awareness he caught a trace of something—a presence: Sakura's chakra.

He closed his mouth again as he concentrated on keeping himself aware of the flow. Sakura gave a gentle laugh, and the chakra coming from her flickered with mirth. It was like a flame, he thought as he sensed her chakra fluctuate within her, as unpredictable as

fire. Sakura's chakra felt warm on the edge of his conscious mind—and gentle, like the shyness of a candle's flame.

"See?" she said after a moment, her chakra flaring to reflect her approval, "I knew you would be able to do it. You just have to try hard enough."

Things were always easier said than done, Sasuke noted with irritation, as he stood perfectly motionless in Training Ground Three. He was concentrating to the best of his ability, and focusing his chakra as well as he could, but he could still not pick up the chakra signature of his teammate. From the time that they had arrived at the grounds, after Naruto had come to pick him up at ten that morning, the both of them had been training non-stop, and currently Naruto was in hiding.

This had to be the twelfth sneak attack that the fox-faced boy was attempting since training started. Sakura said it was still too early to expect to be able to sense signatures during fights because it was too distracting, so he still only had his basic sense to try and locate Naruto with. It was an all-out fight, anything goes—of course not to the death, but it was still a challenge nonetheless. When sparring with Sakura, he had refrained from using ninjutsu for two reasons: first of all, it was *taijutsu* practice and it would be unfair to use ninjutsu; second reason being was that he was afraid to hurt her.

He wasn't so worried about using basic ninjutsu in this fight however, due to the fact that he knew Naruto could withstand it. Having severely burned Naruto at their fight in the Valley of the End—something he now felt extremely guilty for doing—he knew that Naruto could survive. So far, a number of Kage Bunshins had met a fiery end as a result of his 'Katon: Gokakyuu no Jutsu'. When the fight had first started, Naruto had tried close proximity taijutsu, much like Sakura did—but after having all his hits blocked by Sasuke and almost catching powerful hit in the jaw, he had taken to going long range instead.

He could tell that Naruto was holding back on him as well, because he had managed to block every single blow thrown at him—something that wouldn't have happened if Naruto were going all-out. But things were more difficult—more challenging—now that the self-proclaimed future Hokage had gone and cowardly hidden in the foliage. The rustling of the leaves masked any movement, and he muttered a quiet curse under his breath.

' *Concentrate...* ' he thought to himself, focusing on his surroundings. He just needed the slightest hint of a signature.

You just have to try hard enough.

How long had Naruto been hiding, he wondered dimly to himself, ten minutes? Fifteen? He expected that the loud-mouthed ninja would have tried another attack by now, but then again, he had been motionless himself over the last little bit. Naruto was probably equally suspicious of Sasuke's still form as Sasuke was of Naruto's duration of concealment.

... *Try hard enough...*

His fingers were folded into a seal that helped focus chakra, and he clenched them tighter, as if that would help in his concentration. Sakura had lowered her guard on her chakra specifically so that he could pick up on it, but Naruto, who knew nothing of the training with chakra, would have his guard raised completely. It was unlikely that he would be able to pick up on it at all.

Suddenly towards the back left, he heard Naruto leap from the bushes and come rushing at him. Sasuke growled to himself, but did not move. Naruto was attacking solo this time; additionally, by the sounds of the way he was approaching—ignoring the unnecessary battle cry—he had moved his fist forward to punch from behind. He held his position a few more seconds, letting Naruto get closer and closer, and then at the last second, he took a simple step to the right, causing the yelling ninja to miss. Sasuke only had a split second to

react as Naruto unexpectedly came to an abrupt halt, using momentum to turn himself about and take another swing at Sasuke.

Thankfully his speed prevented him from getting badly walloped in the stomach, as he moved his arms to block the unsuspecting blow. However, the force was great enough to knock him off his feet and send him flying backwards a good distance—landing hard on his backside. Growling, he picked himself up off the ground hurriedly, preparing himself for another attack, but none came.

"Ack! Gomen, Sasuke!" Naruto shouted concernedly, and Naruto's approaching footfalls suggested he was coming over to check on his fallen comrade's condition, "Daijoubu?"

"I'm just fine," Sasuke found himself snapping back, cursing himself for underestimating Naruto. That was the third time that day that he had underestimated his best friend—he found it hard grasp the concept that Naruto had grown stronger over the years. Of course common sense told him so much was true, but he still found himself imagining the dobe he had known since his days at the Academy.

"Oi, you don't have to be so rude, teme. I was just asking; Sakura-chan wouldn't be to happy to have you back all damaged and bruised, ne?" the young man retorted reproachfully.

Turning his head where Naruto's voice was coming from, he muttered 'dobe' to himself. Naruto apparently did not hear because there was no outburst of complaint, instead the boy just stood quietly, perhaps contemplating something. Sasuke narrowed his eyes mistrustfully, was Naruto going to try another one of those sneak attacks? It actually wouldn't surprise him if Naruto tried something like that—he had already done it twice, each started with an obviously suspicious silence, much like the one at the moment.

The silence was broken by a loud growl from Naruto's stomach, causing to Sasuke blink and sweatdrop. So much for the 'sneak attack'.

"I'm hungry, dattebayo! Let's go get some ramen or something," Naruto exclaimed suddenly, causing Sasuke to scowl.

"You're always thinking about your stomach," Sasuke found himself saying grouchily, relaxing his defenses. He knew Naruto would most likely whine if he wasn't fed, so he might as well agree and get lunch over with.

"No I don't!" Naruto exclaimed indignantly, "You're confusing me with Chouji, teme."

Sasuke found his lip curling in slight amusement despite himself. "If we stop for lunch now then no breaks this afternoon," he told Naruto firmly, but knew that Naruto probably didn't have any problem with that.

"Hai!" Naruto agreed heartily, "To Ichiraku's!"

Sakura checked off the last item on her shopping list and walked lazily down the streets of the market. Looking up at the sky where the sun was reaching its pinnacle, she thought of Sasuke and Naruto—she hoped that the two of them stopped for lunch. Knowing Naruto he would get hungry and probably force Sasuke to go with him to eat something, so she didn't need to worry, she reminded herself. But she couldn't help but feel like she should go check up on them or something.

Being around Sasuke almost all the time, she found it almost alien without him nearby—she missed him a little, but he probably needed the space. And of course this was probably good for his social life as well; he had hardly spoken with anyone since he had gotten out of hospital, determined on training most of the time, but now she was finally forcing him to socialize—even if it was in the form of training. Maybe after she paid for the groceries, she'd stop by Ichiraku's to see if they were there...

"Sakura?"

Turning her head she looked down the aisle she was currently standing in, and met a pair of viridian green eyes much like her own. A friendly smile came on her face as she turned to go approach her mother.

"Hi, Mom," she said happily as her mother gave her a warm hug, "How are you?"

"I'm supposed to be the one asking *you* that," her mother tutted lightly before releasing her daughter, "But for the record, I'm fine."

"I'm fine too," Sakura replied with a laugh, "Better than I've been in a while, actually. A little tired, but nothing else."

"Well, that's good. I suppose if you're rehabilitating that young man all the time, it can be exhausting," her mother stated warmly, her voice filled with understanding, "Speaking of which, where is Sasuke?"

"Oh, he went out training with Naruto today," Sakura explained, clearing the confusion on her mother's face, "I think he needed a break from me—I'm with him all the time, in the morning, training, before bed."

Her mother gave a smile and an approving nod, "Well it sounds like he's getting on better and better. I hope that means that we'll be expecting you home soon?"

Inner Sakura stopped dead in her tracks; she had forgotten to tell her parents about training Sasuke so he could become a member of Team Seven again. Her outward demeanor hadn't changed in the least and she did her best to think of a way to put the information delicately.

"Well, it could be a while longer yet," she replied honestly, choosing her words carefully; Inner Sakura was scrambling about wildly thinking of different sentences to use, "Tsunade-sama has request

that I help him regain strength as a shinobi so that Team Seven had reunite again."

Her mother's face lit up at the latter end of the news and then subsequently fell as she comprehended the former, "Well, couldn't you move back in and still train him?"

"Well, he has trouble with unfamiliar locations," Sakura lied smoothly, hoping her mother wouldn't be able to tell, "He would have difficulty meeting me at the training grounds."

She mentally crossed her fingers hoping that her mother wouldn't suggest that she pick up Sasuke from his house first, then go to the training grounds. Right now, as Sakura saw it, apart from training, she wasn't really doing anything significant that required her to live in the Uchiha household. Other than keeping house and cooking, she played no role in Sasuke's home life. Well, that wasn't entirely true—she kept his nightmares away at night as well. For her that was reason enough to stay; she would not allow him to go through those horrifying experiences on his own. But the most important factor of her staying was that she hadn't been asked to leave yet. She knew Sasuke well enough to know that he would let her know if her presence wasn't welcome. The fact that he hadn't said anything so far served enough indication that she was still welcome.

"Oh, I see," her mother bit her lip nervously, "Well, as long as things are still fine at the house... I'll just be glad when you can come home again. Did Tsunade-sama say when she was planning on reuniting the team?"

"She said October," Sakura replied, wishing that her mother hadn't thought to ask that.

"So long from now?" her mother asked dolefully, "It's only the beginning of August, that's still two months at the very earliest."

"It's okay Mom," Sakura said reassuringly, "It'll seem like no time at all has passed when October comes."

A reproachful look was cast her way, "For you, perhaps; you *like* living with him. I'm just worried about you Sakura, that's all."

"I know you are," Sakura sighed, glancing at her wristwatch subtly, "Anyways, I had better go pay for these groceries, some of these things need to be kept refrigerated."

"Alright, alright," her mother waved her off dismissively, "I won't keep you, seeing as you probably need to get back to your beloved's side."

"Mom!" Sakura exclaimed indignantly, an embarrassed blush creeping on her face, "That was sinking to Kanaye's level!"

A smile spread over her mother's face, "Sorry, dear, couldn't help myself."

Sakura made a face at her mother, who just laughed teasingly in return. Giving her mom a quick hug, she bid her farewell and made her way towards the checkout counter. Before she had walked half way down the aisle, her mother called out after her.

"Oh! Sakura, I almost forgot!"

Turning her head curious over to her mother, she raised an eyebrow, wondering what on earth her mother could want.

"You're father's coming home from his mission on Friday! It's been a long time since the whole family has been in town together at the same time. I was hoping you could come over for dinner on Saturday?" her mother had cupped her hands by her mouth to amplify the sound, "Oh! And Sasuke's invited too, of course."

"Saturday?" she called back to make sure she had heard correctly, and after receiving a nod, she gave her reply: "Okay, we can make it!"

Giving a final wave to her mother, she turned once more to the checkout counter, and it was only after she had paid for everything and was hauling back to the house when something struck her. Knowing her father, and knowing Sasuke... they were not going to like each other at all.

Sasuke was eating his ramen quietly, listening to the different sounds that could be heard around the small stand that he and Naruto were eating their lunch at. There was the bubbling of boiling fluids, the chop of a knife against a cutting board as someone was slicing ingredients, the creak of a chair as someone sat down or got up. The owner was humming jovially to himself as he worked, people chattered as they passed by outside, and Naruto was slurping loudly next to him.

He rolled his chopsticks in his fingers idly, noting the texture as being rough and—on the edge where he had broken them apart—splintery. The smells of the small stand filled his nostrils, enhancing the taste of the soup in his mouth. Everything that his senses were telling him about his surroundings brought back strong memories of his genin days. They would often come here after a mission and all eat ramen—sometimes he would come, other times he would prefer to be alone, or go training. He remembered the time that they had treated Kakashi to ramen as a plot to find out what he looked like under his mask. A small nostalgic smirk came to his lips—he wondered dimly if Sakura and Naruto had ever succeeded in finding out what was under his mask. He supposed it didn't matter, because he'd never be able to find out anyways.

"Oi, Sasuke," Naruto said after a moment, breaking into his reverie. It was only then that Sasuke registered the fact that Naruto had been sitting listlessly for the past few minutes, not touching his ramen; maybe he was finished, "Can I ask you something?"

"What?" he asked shortly, a little annoyed that his thoughts had been interrupted.

"Have you...ever asked anyone out before?"

If the question didn't catch him off guard, the fact that it was coming from Naruto did. He tried to hastily cover up his bafflement by giving a short and abrupt answer.

"No," he stated bluntly before demanding: "Why?"

"Well..." the boy sounded a little embarrassed, or nervous—perhaps a bit of both, "It's just that I was thinking of maybe asking...Hinata-chan out."

"So why ask me if I've ever gone out with anyone?" he asked gruffly; he wasn't the kind of person who was to give out this 'guy to guy' talk about girls.

"Well, if you had, I was hoping maybe you had some tips or something like that," Naruto said sheepishly in reply, "That's all."

"I see."

"So...you've never gone out with anyone, Sasuke?" Naruto sounded amazed, and Sasuke merely shrugged.

He had never had any interest in girls for...well, the majority of his life. As a boy he had never minded talking to them, but he had never had any interest in them, being too young. After his clan was destroyed, he avoided human company in general, hating the stupid fangirls who fawned all over him. As a genin, he managed to get away from the most of them, as a majority of them had been held back at the Academy. Of the rookie genin who had passed, Sakura and Yamanaka Ino were the only fangirls who made it through. Sakura had been the most tolerable of the two, and he hadn't ever regarded her more than a friend anyways.

In the Sound Village, many of the other male sound nin would go to a nearby town and spend time with the local wenches; Sasuke had never taken interest in those trips—being an Uchiha, he was above

such vile desires. The few females at Oto were too old for him and he hadn't particularly wanted company from them anyways, focusing on training instead. There was that one girl who was close to him in age, who worked in the labs—Karin—but he hadn't much association with her.

"Oi, Sasuke?"

"Aa?"

"Do you think that Hinata-chan would say yes if I asked her out?"

Hyuuga Hinata—she was the heir to the main branch of the Hyuuga household, if his memory served correct. A quiet girl, terribly shy—especially around Naruto. He couldn't recall speaking to her...ever. But from what he had heard when they were genin—not that he really paid any attention to begin with—she had been absolutely smitten with Naruto. However, time had passed, and for all he knew, the girl could have changed completely.

"I don't know," he stated finally, then added, "Why the Hyuuga girl? Why not ask Sakura? Or someone else?"

"Teme, you're suggesting that I take my life in my hands," Naruto sounded like he had just heard that the ramen was poisoned, "Sakura-chan would have killed me if I ever asked her."

"I wouldn't be surprised, actually," he smirked dryly, "But I'm surprised you let that deter you."

He had been away from the village for years, he wouldn't be surprised if other men would take up the chance to see if Sakura's love for Uchiha Sasuke had diminished.

"I would have," Naruto admitted after a while, "But I didn't mostly in consideration to her feelings. I told you she was a real mess; I think I would have caused her more grief by asking her out—you know...it looks like I'm hoping she'd give up on you or something."

Sasuke frowned slightly. "She went out with that student of Maito Gai...Rock Lee or something like that."

"With Fuzzy Brows?!" Naruto exclaimed with an incredulous laugh, now sounding like he had been told he was the illegitimate child of the Fourth Hokage, been given the chance to tackle an S-ranked mission, and had to give up ramen for life, "Sakura-chan has never gone out with *anyone* —told me that she couldn't bring herself to say yes to anyone when she was in love with someone else. That's part of the reason I never tried asking her, you know? I knew that she still loved you."

If Sasuke had felt perplexed before, it was nothing compared to how he felt now. A frown darkened on his brow as he tried to put order to the numerous thoughts that had sprung up with this new tidbit of information on Sakura's life over the previous two years. Again his mind touched on the fact that other than her vague explanation on why she was assisting him, that she had given him back at the hospital, she had not shown any signs of still being in love with him. The other was the fact that she had never gone out with anyone *because* she was in love with him. The third thing that stuck out in his mind was the most prominent—and the most difficult one work out. It was a feeling that came with the reception of this news.

Something inside of him seemed to have been holding its breath, and upon learning that Sakura had never gone out with anyone, it had let that breath go, sending a number of senses tumbling inside of him. On top of the confusion he felt with deciphering the emotions, he felt like a tension was gone—almost like relief, he also felt surprise, and something else... He had no idea what.

' *What the hell?*' flitted across his mind as nonsensical sensations faded back to a quieted state, leaving a different feeling behind. The feeling that he thought that he had lost something, but realizing he had it all along.

"Anyways, teme," Naruto said, breaking the long silence that had followed the young man's words, "You be considerate towards Sakura-chan, ne? She cares about you, okay? So don't go doing anything to hurt her, or I'll have to give you a beating."

Sasuke glowered inwardly, how many threats was he going to receive from people who were worried about Sakura? He wasn't going to do anything to hurt her, not again.

A/N: Okay! It took me an age and a day to get this chapter written as well. I actually had to correct the whole first half because it was out of sync with Sasuke's progress rate, but now it's finally done!

On a side note, one anonymous reviewer commented on the story's slow pace, and the lack of developing plot. I'm not offended by this, just to make that clear right off the bat. I know, the slowness of this segment of the story was a bitch to write—there is a plot, however in order to get to said plot we have to get Sasuke up to a point where he isn't entirely helpless and he can actually do something other than wandering around trying not to bump into stuff. Slow pace is mostly due to two things: writing style, and important knit-picky details. What I don't want happening is something like Sasuke using some sort of stellar technique and the readers going: "when the hell did he learn to do that? O.o" The plot starts to move again within the next few chapters and then is right back on track officially at chapter twenty-four. I know that it seems like it has no plot right now, and that's because you can't see the entire picture. It's like building an impressive tower—the base doesn't look nearly as impressive as the rest of the architecture, but those keystones are the most important on holding the rest of the building up. I know how annoying it must be, seeing as it's annoying to write—but I assure you, once the rest of the story is written, you'll see its importance. All I can say that it's a better read than antecedent information, which leads to confusion more often than not :p Again, I'm not offended, I can understand where the comment is coming from and I am doing my best to overcome that milestone.

Chapter 20

A/N: You know why I'm writing this story? Not only am I writing it for the fact that it makes a good story, but it's also in retaliation to Kishimoto Masashi for making Sasuke suffer the most terrible things ever. I cannot see a happy ending for Team Seven—I feel very strongly that Sasuke is going to end up dead, maybe Sakura too. Anyways; if Kishimoto Masashi refuses to give a happy ending to the Naruto series, well then, I'll just have to write one myself. (huffs)

Disclaimer: After twenty chapters, I would think it's up for renewal, wouldn't you? I do not own Naruto, for if I did, Sasuke *would* have blinded himself in the series, thereby preventing the much worse fate he is currently suffering as a result of Orochimaru trying to take him as a vessel.

Chapter Twenty: Dinnertime

There was a cold aura that hung in the air as Sasuke did everything in his power to remain calm and rational. While Sakura was chatting pleasantly with her mother and brother, he could tell it was forced, doing her best to slacken the mood of the room. He was trying his best to be pleasant, which basically meant he wasn't saying anything at all. He could feel Sakura's father's gaze resting distrustfully upon him, studying him like he was something to be regarded with caution and suspicion. Sasuke had placed his hand on his knee, and he was letting his fingers dig into it so hard that he wondered if he might accidentally shatter his kneecap.

His outward appearance was blank, as he usually kept it, but inwardly he was extremely irritated. Dimly he wondered how on earth he had arrived at this exact position, sitting at the Haruno dinner table with Sakura on his left, Kanaye and Sakura's mother across from them, and Sakura's father sitting at the head of the table—

thankfully on the other side of Sakura. Actually, it had all started with a very simple sentence: 'My parents have invited us over for dinner on Saturday evening.' Those eleven words marked the beginning of a number events that led up to how things sat now at the table.

"I think that I should perhaps stay an evening at the Uchiha household," Sakura's father was now saying, and Sasuke inwardly twitched in irritation, "Just to see how things are going."

Sasuke tried his best to remain composed; he just wished the evening would end.

-Earlier that Week -

A long afternoon of training with Naruto had considerably worn Sasuke down that day, and as he finally managed to shake off the exuberant boy, declining the dinner invite for ramen, he wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of the evening relaxing. Walking down the familiar stretch next to his house, he was feeling rather contented, a feeling he hadn't felt in a while. He had hit Naruto square on the jaw that day, having caught his best friend off guard, and was feeling quite proud of his achievement. The weather was warm and through detecting the subtle changes in the outdoor temperature, he could deduce that the sun was most likely setting.

Coming around the corner of the house, a quiet melody caught his ear on the breeze, and he realized it was Sakura in the yard; he most likely would have walked right by without noticing if he hadn't heard the song. He stood for a moment on the porch, listening to her quiet notes, many new fragrances being delivered to him on the wind. He was about to head inside, when something compelled him not to, instead he hopped carefully down off the porch and followed the sound of her humming, the new fragrances growing stronger as he drew nearer to where she was.

He stopped behind her and waited for some sort of greeting. However she just sat where she was on the grass and continued to

hum, working away with whatever she was doing.

The fragrances hung heavily here, and seemed to come from everywhere around him. It was not unpleasant, but a little overwhelming, the great concentration confusing him slightly. The song she was humming was beginning to invade on his content mood, making him feel a little nostalgic for days long gone, days that could never be ever again. Assuming that Sakura wasn't going to say anything, he decided to break the silence.

"Hey," he said awkwardly, used to never being the one to speak first in a conversation.

She paused in her work and her humming died off—the pause was a surprised one, he was sure. However when she responded to his greeting, her voice was warm, "Hi. You're back early."

He gave a grunt in reply and was about to sit down when Sakura called out to him.

"Wait! Don't sit down there—there's a rose plant!" she shouted suddenly, grasping his wrist preventing him from sitting, "Just hang on—" There was shuffling as she moved something, "—okay. You can sit down now."

The hold on his wrist released and he seated himself comfortably down on the lawn, listening to her as she resumed her work, the song picking up from where she left it off.

"What are you doing?" he asked after a moment, listening to the occasional metallic clank and the soft ruffling of the earth as she moved it.

"I'm gardening, silly," she replied lightly, sounding cheerful, "I thought it would have been obvious, seeing as you almost crushed the rose bush I was going to be planting here."

"I see."

"I went out earlier and bought some stuff to put in the garden," Sakura said with a pleasant tone in her voice, "I thought it would be nice to have flowers. You can probably smell them better than I can."

"I could smell them all the way from the porch. You seem to have a lot," he replied, the scent of upturned earth also coming to his nose, along with the grass.

"Yeah. I picked out flowers that were particularly fragrant," she explained; the rose bush he was sitting beside was picked up and moved, "I hope they're to your liking."

"Aa," he replied—they did smell rather nice, even if at the moment it was a little overwhelming.

There was a silence between them after that, and to pass the time, Sasuke put his hands together in a seal to focus his chakra, expanding the area in which he could sense the presence of others. After a few second of deep concentration, Sakura's chakra flickered within his awareness; having gotten a lock, it was easy to maintain awareness of its presence, and he continued to expand the field out. Animals and plants contained low amounts of chakra as well, and if one concentrated hard enough, it could be detected as well, Sakura had told him, however it was unwise to go seeking the presence of chakra in non-sentient beings, as it could hide the chakra of sentient beings.

After a few more minutes of fiddling with the rose bush she was planting, the grass rustled in front of him as Sakura seemed to have stretched out on the lawn. There she lay for a moment longer, and the presence of her chakra disappeared from his awareness. He blinked in surprise.

"Sakura?" he found himself asking, somewhat startled—the lack of chakra sent to him the message that she was dead.

There was a soft silence, but he could subtly catch the sound of her breathing, "It's too easy for you now. We're taking it up a notch."

He gave a short nod and retracted the field of his awareness, concentrating it to where she was located. It was harder now, he noted with frustration; it was like grabbing onto something slippery—someone can hold it for a minute, but then it slips out of one's hands.

"Sasuke?" Sakura spoke after a minute of his trying.

"What is it?" slightly irked that she had disrupted his concentration.

"If I was a rose..." she spoke serenely, like her mind was drifting away to far away places, "...what colour do you think I would be?"

He raised his eyebrow; it was a strange question, to say the least, but he supposed not entirely random. He closed his eyes for a moment in concentration, not that it mattered—it just felt more natural—and contemplated an answer.

"I don't know...pink?" it seemed fitting.

She moved, so that when she spoke her voice was projected towards him, "Really? How come?"

He shrugged lightly. Well, the first colour he supposed he associated with Sakura was pink, because of her hair colour, but other than that, pink just seemed to suit her anyways.

"It's...delicate," he replied, the words sounding awkward from his mouth, "Pink, that is."

"Are you saying I'm delicate?" her voice was teasing—playful, "I thought training with me would have shown you otherwise."

"Emotionally delicate then," he suggested, her depression during his absence coming to mind, "A pink rose is a delicate flower, it can be easily hurt if you're not careful."

She fell into a silence, and a frown came to his face as it stretched out. It was a contemplative silence, and as it continued drag on, he

began to wonder if he had said something to upset her. He was about to ask her if he had when she spoke up again.

"And what about you, Sasuke? What colour of rose are you?" her tone of voice was the same, and the question caught him more off guard than the other one had.

What colour rose was he? Different colours of roses came to mind as he thought about it. Red? —No. White? —No. Yellow? —No. None of the colours seemed to match him; when one thought of roses, they thought of love, ardor, beauty, and compassion—all virtues that he could never label himself with.

"Black," he answered finally, "I would be a black rose."

He could imagine the expression on her face, she was frowning in disapproval, he was sure of it. "There's no such thing," she replied, her voice matching the expression he had imagined in his mind.

The image of a black rose had not come to mind initially when she asked him the question, but instead a withered rose was what he saw, and it was upon that image that he based his justification: "Red roses turn black when they die."

She said nothing to this, his statement seeming to have put her into a silence of shock. She moved to reach out to him, and as she did so, she slipped her hand between his, breaking the seal he was using to focus his chakra. Determinedly she worked her hand so that she grasped one of his, running her thumb over the back of it. Another awkward silence passed between them before he finally decided to free his hand from the hold she had on it.

"I'm going to go inside," he told her, getting to his feet.

"Sasuke..."

He shook his head firmly at her, "It's okay, Sakura. This has nothing to do with the roses."

"No, that's not it," she interrupted, suddenly sounding slightly edgy, "I just wanted to tell you... My parents have invited us over for dinner on Saturday evening."

"Oh," he stated rather bluntly, now feeling stupid, "Okay."

With that last note, he headed indoors, trying to ignore the embarrassed burning on the back of his neck.

Shortly after Sakura had told him about the invitation, Sasuke promptly forgot about it and it never crossed mind as the days passed by. He was focusing mostly on his training, spending sometimes hours in the yard trying to detect Sakura's chakra. After raising the bar on detecting it, he had been able to pinpoint it in a few days, and by the time he had managed that, she had decided to switch the exercises to a longer range—taking up gardening in order to maintain an adequate space between them.

When she was close to him, he could feel the energy of her chakra quite clearly, and he actually came to enjoy sitting close to her, the gentle presence of it helping him keep his focus. But now when she was farther away he only got snatches of it, and he didn't like the space between them. He had spent so much time always by her side that it seemed so strange to have his side suddenly devoid of her. He didn't like it.

To vent his irritation, he did what he had done as a boy, and taken it out on training; while focusing chakra didn't exactly relieve frustration, the snatches he would catch of Sakura's chakra signature was condolence enough. And when they weren't training, he did his best to memorize that signature, committing it into his mind, to make it easier to detect when she was farther away.

As the exercises progressed, he came to learn things about chakra he had never noticed before; of course complete lack of chakra of course meant that the person was dead, but he had never realized that chakra dimmed down at night, becoming semi-dormant when

the owner slept. Chakra was not unlike fire, he had decided, it seemed to have that flickering, wispy nature of a flame—mesmerizing to watch, never the same each time you examined it. He had also come to discover that it also somewhat reflected on the mood of the person—general mood rather than a temporary one. And it was through this learned knowledge that he began to get a better grasp on her signature, far or near, gaining a better understanding of the concept. It was also through this knowledge that he began to get an indication that something was out of place that Saturday.

Sakura had been acting a little strained that day, being a little more critical in training than she normally was, and fussed over him coming home later than usual after training with Naruto. But it wasn't her exterior behaviour that confirmed his suspicions over her mood, it was the slightest change in her chakra signature.

An hour before they were to leave, Sasuke caught the flustered kunoichi as she dashed by, muttering something indistinctive. Grasping one in shoulder each hand, turned her to face him, leaving no room for her to wiggle free, not that it was really necessary—the action effectively stopped her in her tracks. She seemed surprised at the sudden gesture, if not entirely stunned; he supposed the behaviour was a little bold coming from him, but it was Sakura, so he didn't care.

"Sakura," he spoke her name seriously, his head tilted towards where he thought her face was, "Calm down."

She was silent for a while, seeming uncertain of what to say. "C-Calm down?"

"Hn," he gave an emphasizing nod.

"I'm sorry, Sasuke," she said after a moment, letting out a sigh, "It's nothing...well, no, it's just that... Well, I'm just a little worried about dinner tonight, that's all."

He pointedly raised his eyebrow at her, wordlessly telling her to explain.

"To put it simply, my father can be...well, a little difficult," she continued, taking the hint, "He was not at *all* pleased when he found out that I was going to be moving in with you. Not to mention he doesn't particularly like you. Your name being in a bingo book, in addition to what he knows about you leaving the village hasn't put you in a good light. I'm just afraid how he'll react to you this evening—my guess is that he'll be far from polite."

He said nothing to her statement, mulling over her words. Of all the people in Sakura's family, he had heard her complain about her father the most. His stubbornness, his hypocrisy, his unfairness, his bossiness—all were things Sasuke had heard Sakura mention. From what he could gather, her father was someone he would not get along well with in the least. Additionally, Sasuke knew that a foundation of Sakura's father's grudge towards him was most likely due to the depression his daughter had fallen into. Being an ex-criminal also didn't exactly make him look any better. The funny thing was that he actually *wanted* to make a good impression on her family; normally he wouldn't have cared about such things, but it was in order to prevent any further controversy from Sakura's family. If people did not want her living with him, there would have to be time cut out of training to ward off any ill wishers.

"I was going to warn you before we left," she told him and he slackened the grasp on her shoulders slightly, "Sorry that I've been acting...well, oddly. I'm just a bit tense, that's all."

"Just calm down," he told her before releasing her shoulders completely, expecting her to dash off again, but she stayed where she was, seeming to examine him.

"Thanks for not being concerned at all," she said in a sincere tone, "I guess I shouldn't be worrying too much."

He just gave a simply grunt in reply and pushed past her to go put on his shoes in preparation for departure.

Less than twenty minutes later, Sasuke found himself standing on the Haruno doorstep next to Sakura who had just knocked lightly on the door. It wasn't long until he heard footsteps approaching on the other side, and soon the lock was loudly unlatched. The door was opened with the quietest of creaks, and warm air from indoors spilled outside, detected by his sensitive senses.

"Hello, you two," came the kind voice of Sakura's mother; despite the warm tone, it sounded rushed, "Come on in, I'm just putting the last few finishing touches on dinner."

Sasuke heard the door open wider and Sakura led him inside, telling him to mind the step up. As he took off his shoes, he listened to the sounds of the house around him—Sakura taking off her own shoes, sounds of someone walking around upstairs, the sizzling coming from a room nearby, most likely the kitchen. He straightened up, taking the time to absorb the scents around him as Sakura struggled with one of her shoes, muttering obscenely to herself.

The odor of food hung heavily in the air—the distinct smell of steamed rice, the tangy aroma of different spices, and the sour fragrance of soup mixed together to form a pleasant smell of a large meal. He hadn't let Sakura know, since she would have bothered him about it, but he hadn't eaten anything since breakfast, and now he found himself bordering on the edge of ravenous.

"You don't need to put on any indoor footwear," Sakura informed him, most likely thinking that he was waiting for her to produce some shoes for him, "We used to, but now most people are coming in going in such a hurry that we don't even bother anymore."

"Hn," he replied with mild interest, this being the complete opposite of his household when he was a boy. His mother had made sure

everyone had proper indoor footwear or clean feet before anyone was allowed inside—regardless of the hurry they were in.

There were more approaching footsteps as someone came from the direction of the sizzling noise. By the pace and speed, Sasuke assumed it was Sakura's mother again, who was still running about, dealing with last-minute preparations.

"Alright, I think we're almost ready," came the voice of Sakura's mother, "Why don't you both head into the dining room?"

Before either of them could argue otherwise, the both of them found themselves ushered into said dining room and as they approached the room, the tantalizing scents of dinner became stronger. Beside him, he heard Sakura's stomach rumble with hunger; a small smile tugged on the corner of his lips, apparently he wasn't the only one who was hungry.

"It smells really good, Mom," Sakura commented as they turned a corner into the room.

"Why thank you, dear," came the voice of Sakura's mother behind them, "I don't know if I made enough food—I'm thinking that maybe if I can get a spare moment I'll whip something else up..."

"Mom," Sakura stated firmly, making it apparent that there was much more food in the room than Sasuke was aware of, "There's *plenty* . You don't need to go make anything more; it'll be amazing if the five of us will be able to finish what you have made already."

On that comment alone, Sasuke envisioned the table before them laden with a multitude of different dishes, not helping the hunger he was feeling at the moment. Near them, Sakura's mother sounded unsure of the notion.

"Well, alright..." she was saying uncertainly, "But if you want anything more, just be sure to let me know... Anyways, why don't you two take a seat while we wait for the others? —Where is that father of

yours anyways? And Kanaye has gone and disappeared too. I'll be back in a minute."

As Sakura's mother departed, Sakura led Sasuke over towards the table, and taking his hand, she laid it on the back of a chair. After she released his arm, he pulled out the seat and sat himself comfortably on it, folding his hands patiently in his lap.

"Sorry about my mother," Sakura said apologetically once she had taken a seat next to him, "Preparing a large dinner always seems to put some strain on her."

"It's okay," he replied indifferently, more or less just overwhelmed by the difference between his home and the Haruno household.

The Haruno family was so much more different than his had been as a boy—much more chaotic and disorganized. His own mother had always made sure that the food was done ahead of time, and everyone was seated at the table when they needed to be. He and Itachi were to be polite and not speak with anyone unless spoken too; additionally, they could not leave until their mother had told them it was all right. In contrast, the Haruno household and the old Uchiha household seemed to be completely different worlds.

"This always happens," Sakura muttered impatiently, "Whenever it's time for dinner at least one person—if not more—disappears."

Outside the room Sasuke could hear Sakura's mother yelling for the others, and muffled replies of promised haste returned to her from the upstairs area. After a few more moments, loud footfalls rained down on the stairs as someone came down from above. Sakura muttered 'finally' under her breath as someone entered the room.

"Good evening, Emo Prince," came a greeting from Sakura's brother, accompanied by a good-natured punch to Sasuke's shoulder, "And how is his highness tonight?"

"Fine," Sasuke replied evenly, rubbing the shoulder that Kanaye had punched, deciding to let the nickname thing slide this evening.

"Still going with the one-word responses I see," Kanaye laughed, taking a seat down directly across from him.

It was a few seconds before he realized that he should probably be polite and ask something in return, "And how have you been?"

There was a pause in which Sasuke could feel both Sakura and Kanaye stare at him, but said jounin quickly recovered his composure to give a reply.

"Good."

"And you were reprimanding me for my 'one-word' responses," Sasuke smirked good-naturedly.

"Exactly! See how annoying it is?" Kanaye teased; next to him, Sasuke heard Sakura giggle quietly.

Outside the room, and down what Sasuke assumed must be a hallway, there were hurried footsteps that accompanied some bickering, as Sakura's mother seemed to have finally retrieved Sakura's father. Their voices were low but harsh to one another, and even though Sasuke could not hear what they were saying, he had a feeling it had something to do with his presence there that evening. He listened carefully, straining to hear what was being said, however, before he could confirm the topic of argument, the quarreling quickly fell silent as the both of Sakura's parents approached the room.

"We'll talk about this later," were the only faint words that he caught from Sakura's mother before both entered the dining room, "All together at last. I'm sorry you had to wait."

"It wasn't that long of a wait, Mom," Sakura replied as Sasuke heard both parents take a seat.

There was a mumbled apology from Sakura's father, who otherwise remained silent. Sakura's mother then proceeded to pass around the food, continuously saying that it wasn't enough, while Sakura insisted that there was too much. Because he was unable to see what was going around the table, Sasuke listened to Sakura's short but elaborate descriptions of each dish as it came along, interlacing the scents with her descriptions where seemed appropriate. To be polite, Sasuke took a little bit of everything, and upon the first taste of the food, he deduced that Sakura got all her recipes from home—the dishes had the familiar touch that he had come to associate with her cooking.

"I hope it's to your liking," Sakura's mother said uncertainly just barely after he had put the morsel in his mouth. He nodded in reply after savoring the mouthful for a moment; Sakura's mother sighed happily, "I'm glad."

There was a silence in which everyone sat quietly to eat their food, light chitchat flowing back and forth across the table. Most of the conversation was between Sakura, Kanaye and Sakura's mother, Sasuke sometimes throwing in a polite comment where he felt it appropriate to comment. Throughout these mini-exchanges, there was not a word from Sakura's father, who remained silent where he was, and if Sasuke hadn't been able to hear the older man eating, he probably wouldn't have known he was still there. After a time and the food on the plates began to diminish, and Sasuke felt considerably better, his hunger satisfied. It was only at this time that Sakura's father, whom Sasuke felt comfortable ignoring up until this point, finally spoke.

"You're a quiet one," was the comment Sakura's father decided to make from the head of the table. A silence fell over the table in surprise of the utterance.

"So I've been told," Sasuke replied without emotion as he turned his head slightly towards the voice, suddenly wary due to the fact that he was unsure of how the comment was to be taken, "The same could be said about you."

The chuckle that was the reply was a polite one, a mirthless one. Sasuke immediately knew that the man at the table's head disapproved of him from this alone.

"Well, I suppose an introduction is in order, how rude of me," Sakura's father said evenly, his voice a little cold, "I am Haruno Kisho."

"Uchiha Sasuke," Sasuke replied politely, but he liked Sakura's father less and less with each passing moment. Sakura's assumption that he and her father would not hit it off was so far proving to be correct.

"I've heard many things about you," her father continued in an ambiguous tone. Sasuke decided to take the comment without care; Sakura's mother however didn't seem to think so highly of it, and kicked her husband quietly under the table—but not quiet enough for Sasuke to miss. "Tell me a little about yourself."

"If you've heard about me, I am sure there is little I can say that you haven't already heard," Sasuke stated politely, but even he could hear the icy tone that matched the older man at the table, "What do you wish to know?"

"Well, I've heard plenty about you from when you lived in Konoha," the man did not need to finish for Sasuke to know where he was headed with his question, "Tell me about your time after your... defection."

Sakura's mother kicked her husband hard under the table, and Sakura herself was immediately on his defensive, "Dad, that's none of your business!"

"Oh, I don't know about that," Sakura's father said offhandedly, "After all, if you're living with him, I deserve to know a little bit of what he was doing while he was away."

"It's a little bit of a personal question, don't you think?" Kanaye asked cautiously from across the table.

"No, it's a fair question," Sasuke stated coldly, and he felt all eyes land on him, "You are an ANBU, right?"

"...Yes," came a hesitant reply from the direction of the table's head.

"Well, then feel free to read the files from my interrogations to find out what you wish. The files contain the most of what I remember," Sasuke replied, his tone as pleasant as pleasant could be for him.

"I'll be sure to review those," Sakura's father replied gruffly, clearly displeased that the question had been sidestepped so easily.

"Anything else you would like to know?" Sasuke asked calmly, the awkwardness of the situation being laid on thicker by the moment. Sakura had surreptitiously grabbed his hand under the table and gave it an anxious squeeze. Then carefully and slowly—most likely so that nobody at the table would notice—she turned his hand over in hers, so that the palm was facing upwards. Sasuke was slightly distracted by her actions, curious as to what she was doing.

"Tell me, how do you feel about Sakura living with you?" her father continued as if there was nothing wrong. His wife was now incessantly kicking him under the table, but he continued to ignore her.

Meanwhile, Sakura was now tracing patterns onto his palm, forming the characters of words, and slowly he realized she was writing something into the palm of his hand.

' Don't tell him anything you don't want to,' was what she had quickly scrawled on his skin.

"She is very helpful," Sasuke replied honestly to the question asked of him, closing his hand over Sakura's under the table, "She has helped me come quite far in the way of becoming accustomed to

being blind. She has done much more for me than I expected of her, keeping the house clean, cooking, and shopping along with rehabilitation and training. Additionally, she is good company to have around."

Sasuke could feel Sakura's wrist go slack under the table; she had been worried about his response, he realized. He squeezed her hand in what he hoped she would interpret as a reassuring manner; did she really feel that he didn't want her around?

"And how are rehabilitation and training coming?"

It was Sakura who answered the question: "It's going fine, things are running smoothly and improved tremendously in such a short time. I'm glad with the progress we've made."

There was a contemplative pause from Sakura's father, "So how long do expect before his training is complete?"

Another swift kick was delivered under the table and Sakura's voice sounded slightly irritated when she replied. "I can't rightly say. It could be anywhere from a month to three months."

"I see... May I ask you something, Sasuke?"

"You may," he replied without emotion, his patience the older man thinning.

"Why do you insist on being a shinobi? You are at a clear disadvantage, one that you clearly cannot recover from completely," the statement was said in a conversational manner, but the tension in the room seem to thicken, if that was possible, "What are you trying to accomplish through this rehab? Why stay a ninja?"

"I have a certain goal in my life that can only be accomplished through the shinobi lifestyle," Sasuke replied impassively.

"Uh-huh... And is there any particular reason why Sakura is the one who is assisting you in training?"

"I asked her assistance," the frustration he felt was bordering on anger, and he put his free hand on his knee, squeezing it to prevent himself from doing anything stupid.

"Yes, and I agreed to help him," Sakura stated firmly, sounding very irritated.

"I'm just asking," her father stated in a wounded tone, "Things seem to be going just fine. And Sasuke seems to be making excellent progress."

The way that Sakura's father was speaking about the issue strongly suggested that he was leading up to one main point—a thing that Sasuke was already convinced that he did not wish to hear.

"I'd like to see how far you've come," the older man continued, acting as if nothing was the matter, "I think that I should perhaps stay an evening at the Uchiha household—just to see how things are going."

"What?" Sakura asked, sounding absolutely dumbfounded, "You want to stay over at our house?"

"It's *Sasuke's* house, Sakura," her father corrected his daughter firmly, "And I don't see why not. You've both stated that things are well at the house, that progress is good, and that you're both okay with the arrangements. It sounds like nothing inappropriate has happened—"

Sasuke felt his strong dislike towards the older man double, while Kanaye snorted in nervous amusement. Beside him, he could almost feel waves of displeasure radiating off of Sakura, and it seemed like her mother had had enough.

"Perhaps this is not the best time to discuss this, *dear* ," she cut in sharply, her voice dropping a broad hint.

"No, no," Sasuke found himself saying, though he did not know why. Perhaps it was because he wished to find out Sakura's father's full intent, or maybe he just did not want to appear like he was backing out of the situation, "let him finish."

Sakura's displeasure seemed to have been entirely replaced with agitation as she squeezed his hand apprehensively. All sets of eyes turned to where he was sitting, but he kept his face impassive.

"I just want to make sure that things are as you say they are," Sakura's father stated mellowly, the statement sounding more like a threat, "I'll come over tomorrow evening."

"Not tomorrow," Sakura interjected suddenly, "We're very busy, Dad, and I need time to set up a place for you to sleep, and to get extra food to feed an extra person. I won't have enough time for it to be ready by tomorrow."

"Not to mention that you have mission reports to fill and file," Sakura's mother added in, "The Hokage-sama wants those by Tuesday at the very latest."

"Okay, okay," came the grumbled reply, "Wednesday then, unless Kanaye can think of something that I have to do on that day."

"Um," Kanaye sounded like he had been jerked out distant thoughts, most likely having tuned out of the conversation in order to avoid involvement, "Uh...you promised to water the back lawn...?"

The statement clearly said that he pulled the notion off the top of his head, and would have been funny under any other circumstances. While intending to lighten the mood, Sasuke supposed he appreciated the small contribution in delaying the inevitable inspection.

"Wednesday—it's settled then."

It wasn't until they were down the street and around the corner that Sakura had let out a long string of obscene words, each worse than the last. When she had run out of obscenity to utter, she switched to curse words in other various languages, and then let Inner Sakura take hold of her vocabulary. She carried on for all of five minutes, and when she had finally run out of things to say, she stood on the spot, huffing from lack of breath.

Sasuke had stood quietly during the whole spectacle and was now looking at her with raised eyebrows, "Feeling better now?"

Sakura smiled wryly and nodded, then remembering he couldn't see her, added: "Yeah."

She stood in the chill of the evening, looking out down the road, the eerie lamplight making things indiscernible in the darkness. After her father had decided that he was going to be staying with them Wednesday evening, the rest of the evening had been awkward and quiet. While there was nothing particularly wrong with her father coming to stay with them at the Uchiha household, seeing as they were being honest and nothing indecent was happening, however the rudeness of inviting himself over, doubled with the fact that it was due to lack of trust, made the whole prospect disagreeable with Sakura. Sasuke had taken the whole thing emotionlessly, such was his talent, but she could tell that he was irritated to say the very least—she had spent enough time with him to know how he felt.

"Well," she said after a while, having regained her composure, "You know how I feel about the situation—how do you feel about it?"

A ghost of a smirk passed over his lips at the mention of her behaviour. "I don't want him over, but I suppose we don't have any choice on the matter."

"No, we don't," she found herself sighing.

"Also, I think that if we can convince your father to agree with the situation, then we may not run into any more controversy—for a

time," he said contemplatively, and Sakura turned her gaze towards him.

"I guess so," Sakura rubbed her temples in a soothing manner, applying a little chakra to ease the sharp pang of a headache that had just began to come up, "I'm just glad that you aren't terribly offended by his rudeness. I'm sorry for that."

"Don't be," he told her firmly, "You're not in any way responsible for how your father acted this evening. And while I'm not happy with his coming to the household, I can't say that I share in the your sentiments involving your father and interesting vocabulary."

Sakura felt her face flush, "Ugh, ignore that rant, please. When I get mad... Well, you heard me and I no argue. I can say a lot of things when I get mad, most of them I don't mean, and often I regret saying all of them."

Which was the truth, she felt guilty at that moment, having let her inner self take over on her rant—something she didn't do that often because of dangerous consequences.

"It's only going to be for the one night," Sasuke said after a moment, "All we have to do is get through it."

Sakura sighed nodded; not that nodding was necessary. "I guess you're right," she reached out and grabbed his arm, and began to lead him back towards the neighbourhood where the Uchiha manor lay, trying her best not to be angry at her father—even though Inner Sakura was telling her she had every right to be.

"Sakura?" Sasuke asked after a moment.

"Yeah?"

"That thing you did under the table—writing in my hand," he started, and she turned her head to look at him inquisitively. It had been a spur of the moment thing, a desperate attempt to tell him to ignore

her father without saying it out loud—she wondered why he was dwelling on it. "I want to incorporate that into my rehabilitation schedule."

Confused at first, Sakura pondered why he would want to do such a thing, but as she thought about it, many uses came to mind. It would be useful on missions when she wanted to send him a silent message without whispering, she could send quiet messages to him without others hearing, and other things like that.

"Sure thing," she told him afterwards, then let out another sigh, "Looks like we have a lot to do this coming week."

"Don't we always?" he asked in a matter-of-fact tone, which caused her to smile slightly.

"I guess we do," she replied mellowly, turning her head up towards the sky—the stars sparkled like a sequined blanket.

A/N: I thought I would have lots of fun writing the scene at the dinner table, but it proved to be the hardest to write. ;; Oh well, got it done and I guess I can say that I'm satisfied with it. This chapter took me two weeks to get finished (pokes) so review! I don't know how the two are related, but review anyways, please.

IMPORTANT NOTICE: Due to the recent exams, I've fallen drastically behind in my writing, and I've decided that **there will be no update next Wednesday** . I will be updating on the **following Wednesday** That's all. Hopefully I'll be able to catch up now that school is done. Wish me luck!

Chapter 21

A/N: (sigh) Looks like I've finally hit a slow spot. I'm not producing chapters as quickly as I did when I initially started. :/ I've mostly been drawing lately instead of writing. Naruto fanart of course :p If you're curious you can take a look at it if you want. Click on the 'homepage' link on my profile. Oh, and a thanks goes to everyone who wished me luck on my exams.

I'd just like to announce this. Since chapter twelve, there's always been at least one anonymous review per chapter saying that I should get on with the plot. I've already explained: *I'm working on it !* Patience is a virtue, and if you're lacking that virtue, well, then don't read the story. Any more comments on pace or lack of plot will be ignored. I explained myself at the end of chapter nineteen, and I'm tired of repeating myself. I'm not pointing fingers at anyone in particular, and this would not be here if the reviews were not anonymous. Those of you who have been supportive and helpful throughout the duration of this fannovel, can disregard this message.

Chapter Twenty-One: Illusion

After the dinner over at Sakura's house, Sasuke hadn't really bothered himself with the concept of Sakura's father coming to stay with them at the Uchiha manor. Of course he wasn't happy about it, as he had told Sakura, but it was a test, he had decided, and once it was over with, he wouldn't have to deal with any more problems from her father. The matter was put out of his head for the time being, as he focused instead on the training that was presented to him—in fact, the only reminder he received about Wednesday night, was the fact that Sakura was somewhat agitated, and her charka signature had changed slightly to match her underlying mood. However, she had not once spoken about Wednesday until supper on Tuesday night.

He himself was in a relatively good mood, having finally managed to break through Sakura's highest level of chakra masking that very afternoon. Even now as she sat across the table from him, with her guard at its maximum, he could still sense the gentle chakra flickering opposite him. Feeling rather proud of himself, he finished up the meal that was sitting in front of him, prodding carefully in the bowl to make sure that he hadn't missed anything in the bottom. It had been silent between them while they were eating, and he could tell that something was bothering his kunoichi companion, but he did not make note of it, hoping that whatever was the matter would go away.

"I think we should start sleeping in separate rooms," Sakura stated calmly after a while, breaking the quietness of the room.

Sasuke paused in his exploration of the bowl with the utensils in his hands, a frown coming across his face. "I don't want you to," he told her abruptly, the words just slipping out of his mouth, realizing too late what he had just said.

He felt the back of his neck getting warm as Sakura's gaze fell on him; he knew she was surprised, which was understandable, seeing as he had just surprised himself. Knowing that there was no further comment he could make to correct his blunt statement, he decided to say nothing else, knowing it would only damage the situation even more. He supposed it was true, the fact that he didn't want her to move to another room—not just yet—he didn't want to face his nightmares alone. It was a bit ironic that he would only grudgingly admit to himself that he didn't want her to go, when he had just admitted it out loud without thinking. His good mood fouled.

Sakura was quiet for a moment longer, the ambiance of the room seeming to change from surprised to sullen. "I know you don't," was all she said in reply.

"Then why?" he demanded; he was growing angry because the smallest seed of worry had sprouted up in him. What was wrong? What had he done to drive her away? He began to question whether

he had somehow crossed the fine line that became visible every time he woke to find that she had once again warded away his troubled dreams.

"My father," she responded quietly, "He's coming over tomorrow night, you know."

"I thought that your parents were aware of the accommodation arrangements?" he spoke curtly, his anger rising, his worry completely gone at this point. He wasn't angry with Sakura, he was angry because of the fact that her father was the cause of her moving, yet he found himself taking it out on Sakura. The fact that he was doing so irked him further, not helping in the least.

"They are...it's just that we've been living together for a while, and I think that people would expect us to be sleeping in separate rooms by now," she explained patiently, calmly, but the doleful undertone suggested that she herself did not want to move either, "And we're going to have to get used to sleeping in separate rooms eventually, because we both know I'm not going to be here forever. I just thought that tomorrow night is as good as any night to start."

He said nothing to her words, knowing perfectly well that they were true. But that did not make him any happier with the notion. So what if she had to move out eventually? That did not necessarily mean that she had to switch rooms until that day. When she had first told him that she would have to stay in his room, he had not liked the idea, but now, almost unwillingly, he found himself liking her presence. Contradicting thoughts often filled his mind in the morning when he heard her joints cracking from the awkward sitting positions she often fell asleep in. She wasn't getting enough rest because of him, but she banished away the hated nightmares, and for that he was thankful.

He contemplated this in his mind, doubt beginning to come to him. Maybe it would be better for her to move rooms, he thought bitterly, after all, she would be able to get a better night's sleep. As a result, she could help him in the day without fatigue overcoming her. But on

the other hand...to face the nightmares alone? His thoughts now negated one another and he didn't know what to think anymore.

"Do you want to move to another room?" he asked her. He shouldn't be the one to choose between her bettered sleep and his desire for her to stay close by—he knew that he would end up making the more selfish of the two choices.

A sigh. "No—I don't. But it you yourself who said we can't keep doing this, Sasuke. And what will you do when I have to move out for good and you are left by yourself?"

"Don't worry about me," he replied gruffly, his mood dark and brooding now. She did not want to move, but she was doing what he could not: do what she had to, despite what she wanted.

Silence lingered a moment longer before she spoke again. "I'm going to clean out one of the extra rooms in the hall and set up there. Hopefully this'll meet my father's approval."

"Hn." He gave a short one-syllable response—she would know he was displeased.

Taking the hint, she made an attempt of condolence, seeming to deem it necessary. "You're nightmares seemed to be getting better," she offered quietly.

He gave a quiet scoffing 'tch' before setting down his bowl and chopsticks sharply. She didn't have any idea.

"You don't know what I dream about," he coldly answered.

"I may not know," she said sadly, "but I can imagine."

He did not reply, but instead got up from the table. After muttering a polite 'thank you for the food' he walked out of the kitchen, brooding. She could maybe imagine what plagued his dreams, but she could

not begin to grasp what he felt when she came to his side and dispelled them. She could not imagine his relief.

There was the dull thudding of Sakura's heartbeat in Sasuke's ears—a sound that had become familiar to him over the past couple months. It was always the first thing he would wake up to, the rhythmic sound reminding him that he was not alone in the darkness of the world around him. A comforting sound—a sound that he might not be able to hear again after that day.

It was Wednesday morning, and today he had woken first out of the two of them. Normally it was customary to wake the other once one had woken up, but right now, he didn't want to wake Sakura, he wanted to make that moment last as long as he possibly could, even if it meant only a few seconds longer.

He held onto her securely, like he always did, his arms wrapped tightly around her tiny waist, pulling himself closer to her warmth. He could feel her rib cage expand and fall back, her breathing soft and quiet. He found himself wondering if he was holding on too tightly to her, if she was breathing so softly because of his grip. Subtly, so as not to wake her, he loosened his grasp, before falling motionless again. Her arms were wrapped protectively around him, in a shielding manner, her one hand clasped over his shoulder sturdily, but not firmly. He found it somewhat ironic that as children he always found himself, in some way or another, protecting her, and yet here it was she who was watching over him.

When had he become so dependant on her? When had the benevolent act, which he had so harshly forbade her to do, become something that was now expected? Of course he didn't always wake up to find her holding onto him—those were the days that the nightmares decided not to visit him at night, but those nights were scarce. And over time, he found that if he woke without her there, he felt a split second of panic, that up until that point—when faced with the fact that she might not ever be there to protect him again—he had refused to acknowledge.

She stirred slightly, and the chakra that had been somewhat dormant inside her began to awaken along with her conscious mind. He didn't entirely understand why—just like he didn't understand why having her there was so important to him—but he continued to lie still. She shifted slightly but he did not move, pretending to still be asleep; she should not be able to tell if he was awake or asleep, his chakra guard was up, and she had not been practicing to detect his chakra. Just a little longer, he told himself, just a few more moments; until she 'woke' him, he would continue to pretend to sleep.

"Sasuke?" she murmured quietly, "Are you awake?"

The way she spoke was so quiet that it was like she was afraid that she might actually wake him. She too remained still, and if not for her chakra, which was no longer dormant, he could have believed that she had fallen asleep again. But no, she was awake, and like him, unmoving. She let out the quietest of sighs, and after a moment, the grip she had on his shoulder slackened, the hand moving to rest on his head. There it rested for a moment, and then tentatively she brushed his bangs delicately away from his face. He could not tell what she was feeling at that moment, but there was something melancholy about the way she was gently stroking his hair, something that said she too never wanted to get up.

Both remained that way for some time—her stroking his head gently, him lying perfectly still. The stroking of his hair he could have done without, he told himself, but admittedly it was in a way...soothing. Sleep began to creep back to the edge of his mind again, and he wondered that if he actually fell asleep again he could wake again and find Wednesday long gone. It was just as he was beginning to doze off again that she spoke.

"Oh, Sasuke..." she sighed wearily—sadly, "...What a horrible place the world of dreams must be for you."

She stopped stroking his hair then, and gave him a quick embrace. Another small sigh followed that before she began to shake him awake. Normally the other woke with this wordless gesture, but he

would not 'wake' to that alone, he would be stubborn. It would delay the inevitable by only a few seconds.

"Sasuke," she murmured, more insistently this time, "Please, wake up."

Slowly, and unwillingly, he opened his eyes, blinking a couple of times in order to feign sleepiness. He released his grasp around her, and sat upright, folding his hands in his lap. He could feel her eyes on him, but he ignored it, remaining silent. It was only when she moved to leave did he say anything.

"When are you going to be moving your things?" he asked her, his face turned away from her.

"Hopefully this morning," she replied serenely as her weight on the mattress disappeared.

"Hn," he acknowledged in reply, not moving from where he sat on the bed. His mind was clouded with dark thoughts as he listened to her grab some things from around the room, he was in a foul mood as the prospect that today was the day that Sakura's father would be arriving seemed to connect with him.

"Don't make any breakfast for me," he told to her just as she was about to exit the room, "I'm not hungry."

"You should eat something anyways though," she told him concernedly.

"I don't want anything."

She paused a moment longer in the doorway before letting out another sigh and departing from the room.

"Quite the nice place he has," Sakura's father commented as his daughter led him through the back door, "Quite spacious."

Sakura smiled at her father and gave a little nod, "It's a nice house. I rather like it."

"Well, don't grow too attached to it," he said off-handedly from behind; Inner Sakura cracked her knuckles.

Going around the corner into the living room, then proceeding down the hall, Sakura led her father down the hall to third room on the right, the room that she had prepared for him. Pushing open the door, she stepped aside so her father could enter. The room was as big as Sasuke's but had evidently been a study at some point, as there was a desk and a bookshelf inside; a rolling chair was at the desk and there was no closet in the room. Sakura had rolled out another futon in the middle of the room for her father to sleep on.

"This'll be your room," she told him pleasantly, "The bathroom is right across the hallway, and, as you can see, I've set out some towels for you on the desk there."

Her father gave a nod of understanding and set down the backpack that had his things in them. "Where do you sleep?"

Behind her back, Sakura clenched her fist to maintain her patience and replied pleasantly, "The room at the end of the hall on the left." She knew what his next question would be, so she answered it before he could ask, "Sasuke's room is the one next to this one, on our right."

He gave an approving nod, "I'm glad that you're in different rooms now. How long ago did that happen?"

"Quite a while ago," she lied easily, inwardly angered by her father's lack of trust in both her and Sasuke, "Have you had any lunch yet?"

"No, actually, I haven't," her father stated as they both left the room.

"I'll make something then," she replied lightly.

"Where is Sasuke, by the way?" her father asked casually, "I haven't seen him around."

"Oh, he's out training with Naruto, this morning," Sakura replied lightly, "Sometimes he and Naruto go training together when I have something that needs to be done."

Out of the corner of her eye she saw her father give another approving nod. She knew that her father was only worried for her, and that he meant well, but she found it offending how much he distrusted Sasuke, which to her was like distrusting herself. But she had to remind herself that Sasuke was right, it was only for one night, and after that they should not run into any problems if they met her father's standards. It was only until tomorrow—yet tomorrow seemed ages away.

Sasuke stood for a moment outside the back porch door; his hand lay carefully on the grain of the wooden door, feeling the texture beneath his sensitive palm. He had expanded his senses outwards, and within the house he could sense Sakura's familiar chakra signature, and another one—an unfamiliar one. If he were to hazard a guess though, he would say that it was most likely Sakura's father who was the owner of the other chakra signature in the house. Sasuke growled audibly to himself before reaching for the handle and opening the door.

Casual conversation drifted down the hallway in Sasuke's direction as he kicked off his shoes, putting his hand on the wall to maintain balance. He stepped up into the house and was about to proceed down the hall when his toes collided with something rather big and bulky. He stumbled slightly and reflexively his hand went to the wall to regain his balance. Having recovered his steadiness, he muttered a quiet curse to himself and knelt down next to what he had just tripped over. It was a pair of large shoes—Sakura's father's shoes.

Putting them neatly aside so that he wouldn't trip on them later, he took the familiar path to the kitchen, the conversation becoming

coherent to his ears. The topic was nothing of importance to him, so he paid no heed to it and entered the room. From his senses, he could tell that Sakura was sitting where she normally sat, across from the place he sat at the table. But the way her voice was projected, he could tell that she was not facing towards him like she normally would have been, but was in fact turned to the right, where her father was sitting on the side of the table.

"Oh, you're back Sasuke," Sakura said in pleasant surprise as he walked into the room, her voice aimed in his direction, "I wasn't expecting you to come back so soon."

He smirked grimly to himself at the comment. He would have loved to have stayed out the entire afternoon, but unfortunately, Naruto had somewhere to be, and took him home earlier.

"Naruto had something to do," he explained, pausing in the doorway.

"Naruto, having something to do?" her voice was surprised, "Like what?"

"He said he was having lunch with the Hyuuga girl," he replied shrugging, heading towards the fridge.

"Oh, that's...unexpected," Sakura stated awkwardly. Sasuke grinned to himself again; he knew that Sakura was probably was inwardly exploding over the news. He had often heard her complain about Naruto's stupidity towards Hyuuga Hinata's feelings, and now that Sasuke had just informed her that Naruto was having lunch with the Hyuuga Head's heir, amazed was probably the poorest word to describe her reaction.

Suddenly, his toes were struck horribly with the sensation of pain again he crashed into what appeared to be the table's leg. Tripping gracelessly, he found obscenities emitting from his mouth before he could catch himself, not that he cared at that point—his toes were on fire.

"Oh gods!" Sakura exclaimed, and her chakra signature drew closer to where he was, "Sasuke, are you alright?"

"No," he shot heatedly, picking himself off the floor and glaring violently forwards, "Who the *hell* moved the table?"

"Moved the table?" she sounded confused, "I don't think the table's been moved at all."

"It's supposed to be right here," he insisted angrily, pointing downwards at the ground where he remembered the table being last, about two inches inwards from where he had painfully discovered it now lay.

Incidentally, it was moved over in the opposite of where Sakura's father was sitting; Sasuke turned his head towards the older man, forcing an expression on his face that demanded answers.

"Sorry about that," Sakura's father replied lightly, "It was a bit cramped at this end, I just thought I would shift it forwards a little."

"Care to move it back?" Sasuke found himself asking sarcastically, his voice dripping with venom.

"Well..." the man sounded like he was trying to think of an excuse not to move back to its original position.

"Please, Dad, I don't want Sasuke breaking any toes," Sakura said calmly, and after a second, there was a light shuffling noise as the table was slid back to where it initially lay. "Thank you. Sasuke? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he replied a little harsher than he intended, knowing that she was in no way responsible for the migration of the table. He pushed his way past her and again proceeded towards the fridge once more; Sakura's gaze lingered on him for a moment before she shuffled back to her spot at the table. Meanwhile, he was feeling

around in the fridge for the water bottle he had put in there the other day, however now it was no where near where he had put it.

"Sakura, there was a water bottle in here, where'd it go?" he asked her, still feeling around, his fingers colliding with random objects that he didn't recall ever being in those spots previously.

"Oh, I might have moved it," Sakura's father said pleasantly, "I moved some things when I was getting some vegetables out of there for her."

He shuffled grouchy out of the way as Sakura got up to look inside the fridge for him. He wasn't in a good mood to begin with, starting that very morning, and now he was in even fouler mood. After a moment of rummaging around in the fridge, Sakura grabbed his hand and put the cool bottle in his hand.

"There you are," she said pleasantly, and he grunted a short thanks before turning to walk out of the kitchen.

"I'm going outside to practice focusing chakra," he said over his shoulder, "If you need me, you know where I am."

"Wait, aren't you going to have any lunch?" Sakura called after him, seeming somewhat alarmed.

He shook his head firmly, not turning around, "I'm still not hungry."

With that final note, he hurried out to the backyard before Sakura could protest any further. In actuality he was pretty hungry, but he didn't think that he could stand the presence of Sakura's father at the moment. Carefully bypassing the large shoes that he had set aside in the hallway, he was thankful that it would just be for one night. The voice of Sakura's father drifted down the hallway after him, apparently thinking Sasuke was out of earshot.

"He's a very grouchy person."

Growling quietly to himself, Sasuke quickly put his shoes back on and slipped out the back door.

The afternoon seemed to last and eternity to Sakura, the constant eye of her father lying on them was almost too much to bear, and Sasuke was having a harder time of it than she was. Focusing chakra required no assistance on her part, so to make it look like she was actually doing something in the way of rehabilitation, Sakura came and sat next to Sasuke, focusing her own chakra, trying to amplify her signature so that it would block out her father's signal. Having gotten past the point of detecting her chakra signature with her guard at his highest, he was easily thrown off by her overwhelming signature and could not detect her father who was observing at a distance.

"Must he stand there?" he had muttered quietly under his breath at her, "I don't like him watching us like that."

She had been sitting with his back to his, with her fingers folded into the hand sign 'o-hitsuji' to better focus her own chakra. "What else is he going to do? He *is* here to observe us. Just try and pick up on his chakra, Sasuke," she had muttered back quietly through clenched teeth.

When the afternoon had finally passed to the point where it was close enough to dinnertime to use it as an excuse to get up and distract her father from their apparent lack of progress (Watching people focus chakra did appear to be rather unproductive.), they did so. Sasuke was insisting that he would not eat anything again, but Sakura decided to put her foot down and forced him to eat a sandwich. The table was awkwardly silent, Sasuke silent because her father was present, Sakura silent because Sasuke was silent and her father was silent because she was silent.

Afterwards, Sakura suggested that her father accompany them on their evening walk, and reluctantly, Sasuke agreed. But knowing the young Uchiha, he would rather stay home than go. The walk too had

been awkwardly silent, and Sakura found it annoying how her father eyed their linked arms with mistrust in his eyes. Thankfully he had said nothing, but he was being rather childish, she concluded, he was not acting like an adult.

It was barely dark when they returned, and they had hardly gotten through the door when Sasuke seemed to decide that he couldn't stand the presence of her father any longer.

"I'm going to bed," he told the two of them gruffly before heading off down the hallway towards the living room.

"What, already—Sasuke! Wai—" Sakura called out after him, but he had disappeared around the corner. Sighing she turned to her father, "Hang on a second."

"No, I think he's got the right idea Sakura, you should rest some," her father said in a reasonable tone, and she looked over at him, in slight surprise, before he added, "You work very hard weighting hand and foot on him."

Inner Sakura shook a fist at her father, while outwardly she glared at him. "Fine then," she said before running after Sasuke.

The day had not gone at all like she had expected—well, in all honesty, she hadn't known what to expect to begin with, but it wasn't this. The two of them were both being suspicious of one another, her father being overly analytical, while Sasuke simply didn't like him in return. As she passed down the second hallway, she crashed headlong into Sasuke who was exiting the bathroom. He must have detected her approaching chakra, because instead of acting surprised, he merely caught her before she knocked them both over.

"If you want to talk," he told her emotionlessly, "then we'll talk in my room."

"Okay," she murmured quietly, as Sasuke let go of her, offering her to lead the way.

Her father was whistling merrily in the kitchen, as she entered what was no longer 'their room' but Sasuke's room. Taking a few steps into the room she cast a short side-glance into the corner where she used to have her futon, the emptiness of the space seemed so alien. Sasuke closed the door behind him and afterwards, passed her so that he could sit down on the edge of his bed.

"What is it?" he asked her plainly.

She closed her eyes, letting out a quiet exhalation, "I'm sorry my dad is being well...you know."

"I told you before, don't apologize for his behaviour—it's not your fault," Sasuke told her firmly, but otherwise saying nothing.

Sakura was quiet for a moment before changing the topic, "Other than that, how are you holding out?"

A grim smile passed over his lips, like he was mildly amused by the question. She knew the answer was apparent, and after a pause, she went and sat down next to him on the bed's edge. "Are you okay with this?" she asked him, grabbing his hand, running her thumb over the back of his hand, "I can maybe get him to leave."

"I can foresee an all-out argument," he told her with grim humor, "Don't bother."

"Are you sure?" she asked, squeezing his hand slightly, uncertainty in her mind.

"Aa."

"Well, okay. Goodnight then," she stood up slowly, hanging onto his hand a moment longer, "I hope you sleep well."

She meant that sincerely.

About to leave, she was surprised when Sasuke didn't let go of her hand; she turned and looked over her shoulder at him—his

expression was grim, and serious. After a moment, he gave her hand the smallest of squeezes before dropping it. She blinked in surprise, shaking her head slightly to clear it of the astonishment. Her father's approaching footsteps from the kitchen signified that he was drawing nearer, and she hurriedly crossed the room, opening the door and slipping into the hall before her father jumped to any conclusions. Just as she was closing the door, a quiet word came to her ears before it shut completely.

"Goodnight."

The moon was black, like a gaping hole ripped open in the crimson sky, a drop of ink on the red fabric of space—a pupil in the eye of chaos. Scattered clouds of red flitted across the crimson sky, like trickling blood across an endless expanse. Though there was a moon, it cast no light, and even though there was light, there were no shadows. Light was probably a poor way to describe the pale luminosity that illuminated the world around Sasuke. It was more of a dark light, like slender tendrils of smoke, laying thick in the streets of the Uchiha complex, choking out all life.

He hated this place.

He was running endlessly; running up the streets, down the alleyways, around the corners. Bodies, lying slumped up against walls or splayed out in the middle of the roads, were everywhere. Blood was stained and sticky in between the cracks in the cobbles, staining his shoes and the stonework. The stench that hung in the air was distinct and unforgettable; anyone who smelled it would have it imprinted into their memory forever: the acrid odor of blood, the rotting stench of bodies—the smell of dead things, the smell of death itself.

He was running, trying his best to ignore the horrors around him, though it did little good. But he couldn't afford to be distracted, not now; they were already dead, and no matter how much it horrified him, there was nothing he could do about it. There might be

someone still alive, someone he could save; he was stronger now, he had trained with Orochimaru, maybe if he hurried, maybe if he didn't stop this time too look around in horror...he could reach them in time. Maybe he could save his parents.

The scene melted away before him, and recreated itself as something different, the stark black and white of the buildings melding and unfolding to show a different location. The blood-red sky still glowed, untouched by the changes, and still looked as menacing as it shrouded over his new location, his house. His mother and father—he had to hurry, he told himself urgently. Panic was rising inside his chest as he ran around the corner of the house and over the black boards of the veranda. The room was not far, yet the harder he ran, the longer it seemed to take to reach the door. He stretched his hand out in front of him, his fingers brushing the handle on the door. Pulling as hard as he could, he wrenched the door open and stumbled inside.

There was no blood. There were no bodies. But there was a ominous threat of death.

Itachi stood before him; his looming figure had his back turned towards Sasuke, facing away from him. Hatred rose up inside of Sasuke, heating his blood and fueling his anger; Itachi turned slightly and peered at his brother upon his entrance, his red Sharingan eyes piercing Sasuke to his very soul.

' *I'm stronger now,*' Sasuke thought to himself, and warily he prepared to spring at his brother. But something caused him to falter; Itachi had stepped slightly back, a glinting katana blade coming into sight. Why was his katana drawn? They were the only ones in the room, were they not?

Slowly, Itachi raised his katana blade, and took a couple of steps to the side. Behind his brother's figure there was a kneeling person, someone that Sasuke hadn't noticed had been there before. It was a woman, he realized, and his anger was slowly replaced with a fearful confusion. Who was this person? What was his brother going to do?

She was kneeling in a submissive stature, her shoulders sagging, her hands folded in her lap, like she was resigned to her fate. Her head was hung low, the bangs of her hair hanging over her face, hiding any recognizable features. Who was she? It wasn't his mother, yet there was something familiar that he couldn't place. Slowly, the woman moved, shifting her gaze from her lap, up towards where he stood frozen in time. Itachi too was moving, and Sasuke watched with horror as the blade of the katana fall in slow motion.

Eyes pierced out from underneath the woman's bangs, and he realized with sick horror whose execution he was witnessing. Even as the sword hung over her head, the blade slowly falling down on her, she smiled a saddened smile over at him, her eyes colourless and haunted.

"It's okay," she said, her voice reverberating around him, "Don't worry about me, Sasuke-kun."

Time resumed its pace and he watched helplessly as the blade of the katana cut into her back, rendering her lifeless, blood cascading out of her like a grotesque waterfall, and the expression on her face was etched into his mind more clearly than if it had been scratched into it with a hot wire.

He had been too late.

Sasuke sat up straight in bed with a start, his heart pounding heavily in his chest. The sheets stuck to him in the cold sweat that had beaded over his body, and his breath was heavy. He paid no heed to this as a more pressing thought came to his mind. Where was Sakura? Why hadn't she been there next to him, her comforting voice pulling him out of his dreams?

...What if it wasn't a dream?

Frantically he searched for her chakra signature in the room, trembling so hard that he could hardly form the seal that would help

him with control over his own chakra. She wasn't there. She had to be though, she slept here; she had to be...

He scrambled to get out of bed, but his legs were tangled in the sheets and he fell off of it to the floor in a graceless heap. Frozen in the spot momentarily, he listened hard around him, his heartbeat drowning out most of the noises around him. If Itachi was here, he could have heard... If Itachi was here then... Itachi was here. Sakura was missing.

Sakura was missing.

He quickly scrambled to the door of his room, and fumbled to get it open, his breathing irregular and panicky. Two thoughts kept floating across his mind as he half-walked, half-crawled down the hallway: Itachi was here, and Sakura was missing. He had to get to her before Itachi...

He was searching around randomly now, his senses heightened with the instinct of self-preservation, but he tuned most of them out. Deaf to all but his own heartbeat, he ignored the touch and smell of the world around him as he desperately searched for the slightest sign of life that would confirm that Sakura was still alive somewhere. It was then that he caught the slightest flicker on the edge of his awareness. It was faint, it was barely detectable, but it was there.

He was going the right direction, down the hall, her signature; he could sense it. All other senses were gone, he only knew her signature, nothing else; he locked onto it like it was a beacon of light in the storm, a flame in the darkness that enveloped him. Automatically he followed the path of the house he knew, and as he reached the end of the hallway, a new sense of horror grasped at him like an icy claw. The door he stood in front of...

The room that she lay in—it was Itachi's room.

Sakura could be in danger, he reminded himself suddenly, that fear being greater than any reasons why she would be in Itachi's room. With

trembling hands, he felt for the handle on the door; he did not turn it right away, afraid of what might meet him on the other side of the wooden slab. He did not linger long though, and with caution, he turned the handle, and slowly pushed the door open.

It was silent; there was no sound of surprise, no rustling of robes. He waited for the smell of blood to reach his nose, but none came. Cautiously he searched for another signature in the room, but he could not detect one, the only sign of life was coming from Sakura. The signature was so faint though, he noted with apprehension as he crawled forwards into the room; she wasn't dead, which was good, but perhaps injured or unconscious?

He knelt down next to her, listening carefully to her breathing. It was regular, unlabored, peaceful, and deep—she was asleep. Relief flooded over him with such force that he felt that he could have almost cried. She was asleep, not unconscious, not injured. Not dead. Itachi was not here. Sakura had moved to another room because of her father. He remembered now.

With a trembling hand he reached out, and when his fingers met her skin, he brushed it slightly in a sort of caress. Lying down next to her, he encircled his arms around her waist, holding on tightly. She was lying on her side, facing away from him, so when he pulled her closer to him, her back was against his chest. A primary thought was drifting around firmly in his mind, echoing around sharply and clearly. They were not safe, neither of them were. Itachi was still out there and he was a threat. As long as his brother lived, no one would be safe—Sakura would not be safe. He had to protect her; he had to keep her safe.

He *had* to.

A/N: Whee, another chapter finished! I had fun writing the last two parts. Makes me sad though ;.;

And omg! I've made it past 750 reviews! A special shout out of thanks goes to everyone who's reviewed for this story! I couldn't have made it this far without you!

Chapter 22

A/N: Here's an info bit for those of you who like to read these author's notes: there's a new link on my profile to a picture of Kanaye that I drew. (Yes, this time it's me who's drawing it.) For those of you who have trouble imagining him, you'll be able to see what he looks like. :)

Important Notice: As of July 12, I'll be changing my pen name to ObsidianSickle. For those of you who search for this story via my penname, you'll have to start searching for the new one now.

Chapter Twenty-Two: On Hatred

First thing that registered to Sakura's hazy slumber-laden mind was that there was a pair of arms wrapped protectively around her, holding her like she would slip away if the grasp loosened. Not that this was something unusual to wake up to, she would often wake up to situations like this, but her slowly waking mind marked something as out of place. Drowsily, she opened her eyes and was slightly startled to see the wall two feet away from where she lay—not that seeing the wall was unusual to see, as she often saw it when she woke up in her bed, not having to ward any nightmares away. Blinking a couple times, Inner Sakura took the two and two that had added up to five and rearranged the information so that it began to make sense. She wasn't in Sasuke's room—she was in Itachi's.

She was in that room because she had moved out of Sasuke's. She had moved out of Sasuke's because her father was there. The reason she had to move out because of her father was because it would be rid of further controversy and ward off future difficulties. It was pieced out in her mind, and everything made sense, but there was that one small thing that put everything out of place. Sasuke—what was he doing here?

It was then that he stirred slightly in his sleep, and after a moment, she felt his breathing pattern break—he was awake now. The grip around her slackened slightly, and it confirmed her suspicions that he had woken. There was a pause.

"Sasuke...?"

She didn't have to finish her question for him to know she was asking what he was doing there.

"Hn."

She waited for a few seconds for him to elaborate, but he did not do so. He intentionally twisted the questioning tone in her voice and deliberately interpreted it as a question of confirmation. Sighing, she squirmed so that she could roll onto her back; Sasuke loosened his grasp long enough for her to move, but grasped her tightly again once she had done so. She laid one of her hands on his, brushing the back of his hands with her fingertips; another small sigh escaped her.

"Sasuke, why are you in here?" she asked, more directly this time. Now that she was more awake, it was becoming increasingly apparent how bad this situation was. If they were caught, not only would her father most likely try to attack Sasuke, he would drag her home against her will as well. But she did not ask the question out of mere nervousness; she sincerely wanted to know why he was there. The very fact that he had come to her, here, caused her to worry for him. He had most likely dreamed something horrific again, and she felt terrible for not being there. She shouldn't have moved to another room—it had been a mistake to do so.

"I could easily ask you the very same question," he stated in an emotionless tone, his grasp on her unmoving.

The very tone that he used with her—the emotionless sound of it—stung her. It was only recently that she had noticed a slight drop in his manner—while he didn't show much emotion, there was a

change, and she had noticed. For him to use it with her now—that hurt. She had done something to lose both trust and respect from him. She would have rather of had him be angry with her than use that emotionless voice.

When she had made the decision to move in here, she knew he would not be happy about it, and had not told him. She was in fact going to tell him, but she had been saving that for when her father had left. Too late she noted grimly.

"I was going to tell you," she murmured, switching her attention back over to her father's presence, "Look, Sasuke... This doesn't look good, and if my father—"

"He's still asleep," Sasuke cut her off before returning to the matter at hand, "You should have talked to me first."

He no longer used the entirely emotionless voice now, an icy edge was laced into it. Sakura bit her lip slightly, not exactly sure how to respond.

"Would it have done any good?" she asked him despairingly after a moment's consideration.

"I told you that I didn't want this room opened," he told her irately, his voice low.

His grasp on her had not slackened in the least, and if anything was tighter on her still. The pressure from his hold on her, coupled with the tension and the silence in the room, made her feel compressed, nervous, small, at fault, and agitated.

"Sasuke... I...I'm sorry," she murmured. In hindsight, she should have probably talked with him, but she had felt so many reasons not to. There wasn't enough time to discuss it with him, having mentioned the mere notion of moving rooms the night before her father came over. It had taken her the entire previous morning to clean out the room, and she knew that if she had asked Sasuke,

they probably would have been debating it too long, and the room wouldn't have been ready in time.

"Are you?" he asked sharply. She said nothing to this, her emotions sorting themselves out. Sorry for opening the room? –No. Sorry for making him angry? –More sorry than she could describe. Yet how to put it into words that made it sound like she was sorry for making him upset, not for bringing his wrath on her? She couldn't think of anything.

"I didn't think it would affect you this much," she finally said, another sigh in her voice.

"You can't understand," he replied fiercely.

Her temper flared, "Maybe because you won't let me! You won't explain to me, you won't talk about it."

Now they were both angry at one another—just perfect. Inner Sakura was not angry, her outer self was; her Inner Sakura was riddled with guilt and was drifting forlornly around in her mind. But despite the anger that was present, it seemed so contradictory that he had not let go of her. He was still holding her as securely as he had been when she woke up, and she didn't understand. Other times he had been irritated with her, he would distance himself away from her, yet now he refused to let go of her—it was like he was worried or something. Was there something he wasn't telling her?

In the distance, she heard her father suddenly begin to walk around. Inner Sakura was now nervous, and while she was still outwardly angry at Sasuke's stubborn way of bottling his problems up, she realized the dangers of being caught. Even though there was nothing going on, she knew her father would instantly draw conclusions before anyone could explain.

"Look, we'll discuss this later," she told him in agitation.

"No," he replied, finally loosening his grasp on her, allowing her to sit up. Despite the distance separation between them, he had taken her one hand and was holding onto it securely. Sitting up next to her, he told her firmly: "We're done talking."

"Is that how you deal with problems?" she asked him with dismayed frustration, "You ignore them, won't talk about them, and hope they go away?"

"No, that's not it," he replied flatly, his anger apparent.

" *Talk* to me, Sasuke," she told him exasperatedly, "If I don't understand, *make* me understand. What's preventing me from making a mistake just as big as this one another time when I don't understand how it makes you feel?"

Her father was walking around more and more in the background, his footfalls moving about his room. Dammit, why'd he have to be there *that* day? She should have talked to Sasuke about the room earlier, and she mentally cursed her foolishness.

"I don't have to tell you anything," he told her, his tone going back to the icy emotionlessness, "It's none of your business—don't bother me about it."

She felt like something heavy had hit her in the chest, the shock of his words washing over her like a frigid wave. The voice of her thirteen-year-old self played in her head so clearly that the words themselves sent shivers down her spine.

A single tear ran down her cheek. "Why?" she asked, turning to face his retreating back, "Why won't you say anything to me? Why do you shut everyone out? Why won't you tell me—"

" Why do I have to tell you?" he shot back, stopping abruptly, "I'm telling you that you meddle to much. Stop bothering me all the time."

She looked away from him, her gaze resting on the green leaves skittering on the ground in front of her, the tears flowing freely now. A small, sad smile came to her face, "You always act like you hate me, Sasuke-kun."

"The last time you said that to me, Sasuke," she said, forcing calm onto herself, knowing that if her control lapsed for even a moment, that she would undoubtedly begin to cry, "was as you were making one of the biggest mistakes in your life."

If he was going to say anything in reply he wasn't able to do so, as the door to her father's room opened, and footsteps began to approach the room. Sakura noted with horror that the door was still standing open, and there would be no way to stall any entrance.

"Sakura?" her father's voice drifted down the hallway towards the both of them.

"Shit," Sakura cursed quietly, and then turned to Sasuke, "Don't move—at all."

She dropped Sasuke's hand and began to quickly do a sequence of hand signs, doing them as fast as she could without sloppily casting the jutsu. Her father walked in a second after the last hand sign had been completed, and Sakura took on the very picture of innocence when he entered.

"Mornin' Dad," she greeted serenely, sitting upright, her hands folded in her lap.

He cast her a strange look, frowning slightly at her awkward posture, "What are you doing?"

"Meditating," Sakura replied placidly, "What's up?"

"Oh, nothing...nothing," her father replied, scratching his head unconcernedly, "Just thought I heard you talking."

"I didn't say anything," she replied with a frown, trying to match her father's slightly perplexed expression.

"Oh well, must have been hearing things," he told her with a small shrug, "Say, I was wondering if you'd like to spar with me this morning. It's been some time since we've had a chance to spar with one another."

Sakura smiled up at him, "Sure, Dad. After breakfast sound good?"

"Sounds great," he smiled, then looked casually around the room, as if inspecting the contents for any sign of life other than his daughter's, "Sasuke's not in his room, by the way, any idea where he might be?"

Inner Sakura glared violently at her father for his suspicious nature and immediate jump in conclusions. Even though this time he was sort of right in that Sasuke was in her room, but it was a completely different situation from what was most likely going through her father's mind. Outwardly she just pondered the notion for a moment before giving a thoughtful reply.

"He could be out training, sometimes he does that early in the morning."

"Ah, okay," her father replied, before turning to leave again, "Anyways, I'm going to go take a shower."

Sakura found herself compelled to say something more to father, to tell him not to be so judgmental towards Sasuke, to give him a chance. But of course, Sasuke was sitting right there next to her. So instead she merely remained silent, letting her father leave without another word; after the bathroom door was shut, Sakura put her hands together to form a specialized sign that would release the technique she had cast in the room. Genjutsu, she decided, was her best friend at the moment.

"Okay, the coast is clear," she said to Sasuke, who had been sitting completely still through the whole exchange, just like she had instructed him.

He gave a grunt, which she could not interpret, and got to his feet. Saying nothing to her, he left the room in an angry manner, an eerie silence following after him. She watched the open door for a long while afterwards, guilt creeping up inside of her and wrapping its thorny tendrils around her stomach. She curled up in a ball, hugging her knees despairingly, listening to the sound of the shower.

There was a light knock on the door to Itachi's chambers; slowly he looked up from sharpening his kunai, glancing at the door. There was a quick scuffling, and Nariko scrambled to her feet, running towards the door, an eager-to-please expression on her face. The girl was probably six or seven years younger than himself, but she acted like a child sometimes, appreciating things that he had stopped caring about long ago—it was a little...he didn't have a word to describe it. The door creaked open as she pried it open, peering out into the hall; he noted that she quickly jumped aside, repressing a squeak as she recognized the person who had come to call.

Kisame walked into the room without waiting for a word and ignored Nariko, who was somewhat hiding behind the door at his entrance. The Akatsuki members rather terrified the Jinchuuriki, and she tried to avoid crossing their paths if possible. Hidan, Kakuzu, Zetsu and Deidara terrified her—their less than human specializations causing her to put great distance between them and herself. She had once been unfortunate enough to walk in when Hidan had been performing another one of his self-mutilating rituals, and hadn't been the same for days.

And while she saw a lot of Kisame, as he was Itachi's partner on the Akatsuki missions, she did not care for him much either—she had once confided to Itachi that Kisame's sharp and pointed teeth reminded her of fang-bearing animals she saw in her dreams. It did

not take much thought for Itachi to figure out that it was the Weasel tormenting her in her sleep. The seal on her was weak then, he deduced, otherwise it would not have access to her mind.

"What is it?" he asked Kisame levelly as he entered the room.

"Mission briefing," Kisame grunted in return, holding out a set of scrolls towards him, "Found another one, and he wants you along on the trip, could be a handful this one."

With a cold look, Itachi snatched the scrolls away from the missing Mist ninja and set one aside, "I don't have time to be going about hunting down others; I have got my own to deal with. *He* should know that, seeing as he was the one who assigned me to the task in the first place."

"You, girl," Kisame stated, turning towards Nariko, who jumped nervously at being addressed, "Out."

Itachi nodded as she gave him a questioning look, and she quickly left the room, keeping her gaze on the ground. She was used to being given such orders and obeyed them as soon as he gave her a sign that she was to comply. Once the door was closed behind her, and Itachi felt her unguarded chakra signature leave the immediate area, he looked at Kisame.

"What?" he asked, unfurling the scroll he had in his hand.

"He wants you along on this capture—Shichibi this time," Kisame growled, "Supposed to be very clever, recon mission says that the host is clever too."

"As I said, I have my own brat to take care of," replied coolly, "If anything, send *her*, *she* is clever. Or send Deidara and Tobi—Tobi can confuse the Jinchuuriki with his stupidity."

Kisame gave a twisted smirk, all the sharp teeth showing. "Deidara doesn't want to go because he'll have to take Tobi. He wants to avoid

that if possible. Anyways, I'm just the messenger—read the mission report, the mission'll be pretty quick."

Itachi scanned the first few lines before looking up again, "It is in the Land of Lightning—it will take months; if it was quick, he would send Deidara and Tobi, not you and me. *She* would also be better suited to this, she would know the land."

He paused to scan over the scroll to gain a little more scope on the mission, "Not only that but he wants us to make a side trip to the Land of Rain to deliver instructions the subordinates there. I do not want to go on this mission."

"Why are you so concerned about leaving the brat here?" Kisame asked, "She's not going to drop dead of malnourishment anymore."

"The seal placed on her, to hold the demon within her body, is very poorly made," he elaborated, staring resolutely at the floor, "Its consciousness seeps into hers while she sleeps—this should not happen if the seal is functioning properly. It may be able to gain some control over her."

"How do you figure?"

Itachi narrowed his eyes at the floor, eyeing a crack in the concrete, "Understandably she fears the other members of our organization—my concern is that her fear will provoke the seal to slip, which would cause a problem."

"Could we removed it from her?" Kisame offered, "We could seal it before we go."

Itachi shook his head. "I had her looked at a couple days ago."

"By Flower-chan—Konan?"

He gave a nod in reply, "She said that while the Jinchuuriki no longer is in danger of dying from malnourishment, her muscles are unused

and mostly deteriorated. The strain of extracting the demon would only tear her body apart."

Kisame crossed his arms impatiently, "Is that such a bad thing? As long as she won't die the instant it starts being removed, we should be okay."

"She does not know what will happen. If Nariko dies before it is totally removed, the Weasel will most likely die as well," Itachi responded, "I personally believe that this could also lead to an imbalance in the statue, as the other captured ones become more alert during the process. It could cause difficulty for us if they were to escape."

Kisame grunted, and then after a pause, added: "Well, I know she's afraid of a number of us," he said with a smirk, both of them aware the Nariko avoided the Mist ninja as often as she could, "But she doesn't seem to mind Flower-chan. Get her to take care of the girl."

Itachi said nothing in reply. On the edge of his awareness, he could sense Nariko's unguarded chakra returning in the immediate vicinity—he should not be able to sense that chakra, unless something had provoked the Rokubi.

"Look, she's coming back now," Kisame said, picking up on the unique signature as well, "Read the mission file—we won't be leaving for couple more days, you have time to get things sorted out."

He nodded in reply, "I will talk to her about it, and see what can be done."

Kisame nodded, proceeding towards the door, "Keep me notified."

It was then that the door burst open, and a very nervous-looking Nariko entered. She squeaked at the immediate sight of Kisame and stumbled to the side. Both men turned and looked at her. She flushed in embarrassment and wrung her hands nervously.

"I'm sorry, Itachi-sama," she muttered anxiously, "It's just that... Hidan-sama was coming this way and I..."

She trailed off, shuffling nervously on the spot. Out of all the Akatsuki members, Hidan scared Nariko the most because of the incident with the ritual. Itachi waved his hand at her dismissively, nodded at Kisame before turning to the unfurled scroll in his lap. Without a further word, Kisame exited the room, leaving Itachi and Nariko alone.

"I really am sorry, Itachi-sama," she spoke after a moment, "I know you told me to leave, but..."

"It matters not," he replied automatically, his attention turned to the information on the scroll instead, "We were finished talking."

"Oh..."

She sat in the corner quietly for a while, not saying anything, but observing him quietly. He ignored her, focused instead on the mission briefing—Shichibi, the Badger was looking to be a difficult mission indeed. He did not want to go, mostly because of the annoyance of the mission rather than his concern for Nariko's unstable state. While it was a concern to him, he was using her more as an excuse not to go. Unfortunately it looked like they would need him along on the mission as it was. Not only were he and Kisame to capture the Jinchuuriki, but they were to stop by a hideout in Rain to inform the subordinates there that they should prepare for a move sometime around November. The Land of Earth, where they were currently located would be too cold in the upcoming winter, and they would migrate down to Rain to wait it out. Both messenger boy and retriever—he did not like being Akatsuki's pawn.

After a minute, Nariko cautiously approached him and sat next to him, looking down at the page over his shoulder. He cast a glance at her, but otherwise ignored her. He rolled up the first scroll and opened the second, reading up on the known information about the Jinchuuriki who harbored the Seven-Tailed Badger, liking the sound of the mission less and less as he became aware of its location. The

host lived on the edge of Kumogakure, which was deep in the Land of Lightning's heartland. If they did not have to stop at Rain first, it would be faster for he and Kisame to go by sea.

"Itachi-sama?"

He looked at her in response.

"I know they're pretty," she said, reaching out and tracing a couple of characters on the page with her fingertips, "but I don't understand why you stare so intently at them. Do you really find them that fascinating?"

He blinked in surprise for a moment, and then he slowly began to realize that she could not read—or probably had never even heard about reading either.

"Each one represents a sound," he told her without emotion, "Put together they form words. I am reading about the issue Kisame spoke to me about."

She looked at him in surprise. "Really?" she asked in wonder, and when he nodded, her eyes lit up, "Itachi-sama...? Would you teach me? Please?"

Teach her to read? He didn't really see why he should—after all, she would be dead before the year was over. However to say no would cause questions to arise. Having to come up with a reason for not teaching her would cause trouble, seeing as Nariko would not know any reason not to learn. She was a smart girl, despite her inexperience with the world, and could easily put two and two together. She had already been afraid for her life when she first arrived with him and the two subordinates—chances were that even though she had been temporarily reassured, fear for her life could still be a primary concern for her.

"I have somewhere to go," he replied finally, "But when I return, I will teach you."

"Thank-you, Itachi-sama!" she smiled up at him with adoration, her eyes all lit up with wonder.

Something inside of him jabbed him sharply. The more he was around her, the more he was reminded of his brother. There was something disquieting about that fact, but he forced himself to shake off the feeling. It wouldn't be too long before she would be gone anyways, and any more reminders he received about his brother would be gone with her.

Sasuke sat broodingly in the backyard of the Uchiha manor, letting the morning sun shine down on his back, the warmth compensating for the cool freshness in the air. It was around ten o'clock, and he was merely waiting for the spar between Sakura and her father to be done with, so he could take out his anger on the day's training. Sakura said that she was going to test him on how well he could detect chakra signatures, and if he passed, she would put him through a taijutsu test the next day. Even though he was still angry with her for opening Itachi's room, he wanted to get her tests over with.

He was not only impatient that morning, and brooding, but irritated as well, his mood having done the opposite of improve due to events that followed his departure from his brother's room that morning. When Sakura's father had exited the bathroom and returned to the room next door, Sasuke had taken the opportunity to occupy the bathroom next, only to trip over towels left on the floor. Not only that, but he had to submit to a hunt for the shampoo in the shower stall, the bottle having been moved to a foreign corner. After that, he knocked his toothbrush into the sink after discovering that the toothbrush holder had migrated as well. In retaliation to these horrible inconveniences, Sasuke had given Sakura's father the silent treatment at the breakfast table—but he didn't think the point had gotten across, as he was hardly any more quiet than usual.

Where he was sitting, he was off to the side in the yard, sitting near the place where Sakura had been gardening a little less than a week

ago. Sakura and her father were both standing in the middle of the yard, discussing the terms of the spar with one another before beginning. Sasuke was not really paying much attention to what they were saying, merely waiting for the fight to begin so it could be done with, but when he heard mention of him, Sasuke tuned in to what was being said.

"What's with Sasuke?" the voice of Sakura's father was quiet, but with his sharpened hearing, Sasuke could catch it in the clear morning air.

"He's just not a morning person, that's all," Sakura lied easily in reply, "Nothing to be concerned about."

Outwardly, Sasuke did nothing to show that he had even overheard this comment, but inwardly he was bewildered at her ability to pretend like nothing was wrong. She was probably angry with him, yet unlike him, she was able to mask it completely. Kanaye had been right when he had told him that Sakura had an amazing knack for masking her emotions when she wanted to. He on the other hand was making his point to her: she had opened Itachi's bedroom, and he was deeply displeased with her.

He was actually very surprised with what she had done. Hadn't he made it clear enough to her that he did not want that room opened at all? He had; he remembered telling her clearly. But had she said she would leave the room be...? Now that he thought of it, he didn't recall anything of the sort. She had said the notion of keeping the room permanently sealed was stupid—a waste of space. He growled mentally to himself, as he recalled his conversation with her. He reluctantly admitted now that she had a point.

Off to the side, Sakura and her father were beginning their spar; both of them had taken positions ten paces from one another, the location of their chakra signatures told Sasuke as much. He listened half-heartedly as Sakura's father gave the beginning sound and the fight launched into action. What was the difference between him and Sakura, Sasuke wondered as the two signatures darted back and

forth on the lawn, why didn't she understand? She had asked him to talk to her, to make her understand. A reasonable request, yet one he could not fulfill. He could not truly explain it to himself.

Sakura's chakra signature leapt suddenly upwards as her father's signature lunged towards her, giving a shout of alarm at the sudden offensive attack. The fight had Sasuke momentarily distracted as he felt Sakura's chakra signature slip and move—warping. She must have focused the chakra in her feet in order to launch herself high in the air so suddenly. The curiosity over, Sasuke turned his attention back to his thoughts; the thought of Itachi's room being part of the house again was disquieting for him because it brought part of his brother back to the household itself. He didn't want that presence there; it could only bode ill for him. It was because of that mental barrier, the fear of Itachi's presence in the household, that his alarm increased rapidly when he had detected Sakura in that room. The dream had made both the threat and the presence very real.

She shouldn't have scared him like that, he thought fiercely in his mind—he truly thought for a while that she actually could have been dead. He wasn't going to deny it, he had been sincerely afraid for her life; she didn't understand the extent to which he had been worried for her. What frustrated him was that she couldn't understand—she couldn't begin to grasp what he had seen.

The spar in the yard suddenly caught his attention as he felt Sakura's father focusing his chakra and melding it. Her father was a jounin, wasn't he? Sasuke frowned outwardly—the power to which that chakra was being focused, it was dangerous. Listening carefully, he tried to gain some idea to how Sakura was doing in the fight. Heavy breathing met his ears—she was exhausted, he realized; what if she couldn't avoid her father's attack? She could be seriously hurt.

It was as her father was launching his attack that he almost got up to intervene, but at the last possible second, Sakura's chakra did something else that was strange. It had warped again, focusing in a different part of her body; he could sense that it was focused in her

arms from the rough form it had taken, and she was holding it up in front of her. Her father's attack shoved her back a little, but otherwise did nothing. Sasuke relaxed in surprised, he hadn't been expecting Sakura to be able to hold her own against an ANBU.

At least he didn't have to intervene, he noted grimly; he had had no idea what he was going to do if he had jumped up to get in the way, but it had been a reflexive thing. Vaguely he was remembered of his late-night pledge when he stumbled in to find her sleeping. That protective nature—it was something he had always possessed, especially since there was the risk that everything could all be taken away again.

There was a loud shout from Sakura as her father apparently landed a perfect hit on his daughter. Sakura's chakra signature soared backwards a good distance, and landed on the lawn with a painful-sounding thud. Alarm struck him as he detected her chakra signature wavering, fading slightly, bordering on unconscious. Hold her own against an ANBU?! Sasuke demanded angrily to himself, as he found himself leaping to his feet. She was just a chuunin, how could he have been so stupid to assume that?!

Dashing over to where she lay, he cursed himself for getting the least bit distracted. He should have been paying more attention to the fight, he should have realized that there was something off about the proposition to spar with Sakura, what it was, he didn't know, he didn't care.

He knelt down next to her, his anger growing by the minute, but it was not aimed at Sakura, but at her father. "Sakura, are you alright?" he asked her hurriedly, feeling around in the grass for her hand.

His fingers met hers as she reached out weakly towards him; she sounded somewhat dazed when she replied. "Dumb question," she told him, "But I *will* be, even if I'm not now."

About to whirl on Sakura's father to demand what the hell he was doing, he found himself interrupted before he even began to speak.

"Sakura, I have to say I'm a little disappointed," her father said with what sounded like a disapproving tone, "You've fallen in skill, my dear. Haven't you been practicing?"

"She hasn't had *time* to practice," Sasuke found himself spitting out angrily at her father, before he could stop himself from speaking.

"That's what I was afraid of," was the cool reply, and Sasuke found his suspicions rising, "You've become weaker Sakura. You've been spent too much time waiting hand and foot on this boy when you should be spending time on your own studies."

So that's what it was—a test; this was no spar, it was so that her father could find a way to test her abilities discreetly without any reservations. About to lash back a very obscenity-laced, less than polite retort, Sasuke stopped short when Sakura squeezed his hand, and sat up. A frown crossed his face as she laid a hand on her stomach, most likely where she had been hit; the only way he could tell was because her chakra was now being focused discreetly in that hand, the same kind of chakra she used to heal wounds—he knew it well. Her father had hurt her rather badly, yet she was trying to mask it to make it appear like the attack hadn't hurt her at all.

"Dad, this is my mission right now—my task," she spoke calmly and evenly, "I will stick to it until its end, and until then, nothing else should come first."

"This may be your task, but I'm sure Hokage-sama doesn't want your abilities to fall either. You've worked hard to make it to where you are, Sakura, don't lose it all now to ill-placed devotion," her father's voice was cold and severe.

Sakura said nothing in return to this comment, and Sasuke only remained quietly seething due to the pressure Sakura was applying to the hand she held. He was ready to launch into a full-blown argument with Sakura's bastard of a father. It wasn't his place to make the call on whether Sakura stayed or left. Who was he to come

to this house and then criticize how she lived? His angry thoughts got exponentially worse.

After a few minutes of awkward silence, her father turned walked past the both of them and into the house. Sakura continued to remain still, and out of concern Sasuke turned his head slightly towards her, forcing himself to push his thoughts away. The lack of argument from *her* had him worried; did she really believe that she was weak? Or did she agree with her father on the ill-placed devotion?

It wasn't until a few minutes later that she finally spoke. It was a long string of fiercely muttered obscenities—something he had only heard once before: right after dinner last Saturday evening. This was the side of Sakura he didn't see that often, which was probably for the better—this side of her partially emerged when Naruto was being stupid, and came fully into the open when she was extremely angry. This was Demoness Sakura sitting next to him now.

"Losing my skill due to *ill-placed devotion*?! " she hissed violently to herself, "I'll show him who's grown weaker—next time he won't know what hit him."

Her vocabulary deteriorated from there, gradually growing worse as she swore more oaths to herself. Inside himself though, Sasuke found himself a little relieved by all this. She was alright, and she did not agree at all with her father's words. He didn't know when exactly it happened, but he wasn't mad with her any longer—it didn't matter anymore, what was done was done. To remain angry with her would only be stupid, not to mention put them both in ill favor with her father. And now, as he sat next to her, listening to her alternate personality continue to mutter curse words to herself, he found a need to pass her father's judgment. He didn't know why, and didn't care at this point, but he wanted her nearby.

It was late evening when Sakura finally bid farewell to her father at the front gates at the Uchiha manor. Rather glad to be rid of him, she

said her pleasant goodbyes, reassuring him that she would be alright—though inwardly she was still raging at him for believing her weak. However, her anger was thrown off when he waved off her reassurances and told her that he was no longer worried for her while she stayed with Sasuke.

"He came to your side after you lost the match, to see if you were okay," he had said, sounding like he was reluctantly admitting it to her, "I used to be concerned that while you stayed with him, that you would both be misbehaving—" he had ignored the aghast noise she had let out at this point, "—but after meeting him that wasn't what I was worried about anymore. I was worried that he might mistreat you, or act ungrateful for your help. But when he went to see if you were hurt, I realized that I didn't need to worry about it. I still think your devotion is misplaced, and don't think that you can stay here any longer than you have to just because I'm not so worried anymore. Anyways, your mother is probably waiting, so I'm going to take off. See you later, Sakura."

He had departed shortly afterwards. Now she was walking back along the side of the house, the sunlight filtering in gently down from the end of the path. When she reached the corner, she paused at the edge of the veranda and looked out over the yard. After a moments pause, she turned her gaze over to Sasuke who was sitting on the porch's edge a little ways down from where she was standing. She let out a small sigh, still the feeling of guilt knowing in her gut. If she apologized for opening Itachi's room, would he get even angrier with her for mentioning it again?

' *Screw it,*' she thought wearily to herself, taking a few steps towards him, *'I'll just apologize one more time to show that I mean it. If he doesn't want to talk more about it then...'*

She came to a stop about a meter away from him and observed his quiet form for a minute before daring to speak. "My father's gone now. We pass his inspection—just thought you should know."

He gave a grunt in return, but otherwise said nothing to her. Sakura felt a grim look pass over her face, somewhat discouraged by his cold demeanor.

"Sasuke..." she started quietly, "About opening Itachi's room... I really am sorry."

There was a lengthy pause from Sasuke; taking the hint, she turned to continue on inside. If he wasn't going to say anything, she decided there was nothing more she could say to plead her case; she might as well head in and cook some supper. She didn't blame him for being mad at her in the least; she just hoped he would find a way to forgive her for what she had done.

"Forget about it," he said gruffly as she took the first step towards the back door, causing her to immediately stop again. Surprise came over her as she looked at him once more; she was certain he would have been mad.

"O-okay," she muttered before walking to go inside again. Her heart felt a bit lighter already as she turned to continue back into the household.

"Sakura?"

She found herself stopping for a third time within the past few minutes, "Yes?"

A pause. "Do you hate me?"

"Why on earth would I hate you?" the question had dumbfounded her. If anything, she should be the person to ask that question—what wrongs had he committed against her?

"Just answer the question."

She turned her gaze away from him, a small smile on her face, "No. I don't hate you."

"Why not?" his tone did not sound confused, but she knew there was confusion present.

"Why would I?" she returned, completely confused herself, unsure of where this conversation was going.

"Because while in the process of 'making one of the biggest mistakes in my life'," he replied, quoting her earlier words, "I left you unconscious on a bench, right after you told me you loved me."

She turned her gaze to him again, analyzing him carefully. She did not know what thoughts had caused these questions to rise, but she began to map his behaviour carefully, things becoming clearer.

"I was hurt by that—deeply; probably more than anyone could know," she replied tenderly, "But I couldn't hate you for it. Never."

"Why?" his voice was demanding.

"I can't hate you," she responded, her voice becoming gentle and serene, "I might get angry with you sometimes, but I could never hate you."

"I don't understand you," he said after a moment, turning his head slightly away from her, even though he wasn't facing her to begin with.

"It's like you want me to hate you."

"It would be easier if you did."

Guilt. That's what he was feeling right now. Was he thinking about that night, so long ago, when he left Konoha? Her insight told her yes, he was—and he hated himself for it, for leaving. It would be easier on him if she hated him too, that's what he thought, somehow ease the burden of that guilt. It was almost a textbook case, his words making him as transparent as crystal.

"I don't think it would," she said in response to his comment.

There was silence for a time, but Sakura did not move. He wasn't finished talking, or at least she wasn't going to let him be finished now.

"All that time ago, that night..." he muttered quietly that she barely caught his words, "Do you still? –Love me, that is."

She smiled sadly at him, though he would not be able to see it, "Of course."

"In what way?"

"What do you mean in what way?" she frowned slightly in confusion.

"Never mind."

"My love for you has never changed, Sasuke, if that's what you're worried about," she told him perceptively.

"I never said anything about being worried," he cut in tersely, and she paused to examine his body language. He was sitting with his elbow resting on his knee, his chin resting in his palm—his posture was stiff—defensively. She was prying deeply, and he didn't want to let her in that deep, not yet. However she wasn't going to back away now that the doors were opening up slightly, even if it was only a peek through a crack.

"In any case," she continued with a sigh, "I tried to refrain from showing or saying it. I didn't want to make you uncomfortable, especially because of our current situation."

"I see..." he replied after a moment, and then added, "...Is that why you stopped adding the suffix to my name?"

"No—not exactly. Tsunade-sama forbade me from using it," Sakura explained, actually surprised that Sasuke had noticed that she had dropped the suffix on his name, "She said that you were a criminal and should be treated as such."

"I see."

She crossed her arms lazily, gazing intently at him, "Why? Do you miss it?"

"No."

There was another pause. The defensive nature earlier had caused her mind to wonder about this conversation. Why was he asking here these questions? Was there a reason behind it all?

"Why did you ask if I still loved you?" she asked, preparing for a deadpan answer in reply.

"I just wanted to know," he replied, giving the type of answer she had been expecting.

She uncrossed her arms, and walked so she was standing close to him, not beside him, but a little bit behind. "You know, that's the reason why I can't hate you," she said passively, "It's because I love you."

"If I were you, I would hate Uchiha Sasuke," he muttered, taking his chin off of his hand, and lacing his fingers together to rest in his lap.

"You already hate yourself. Don't," she told him somberly, "Don't dwell on the past. I don't hold your mistakes against you, don't hold them against yourself."

"I hurt you."

"I forgave you."

"How can you forgive so easily?!" he demanded of her suddenly. He was angry now—angry with her for not hating him, angry with himself for the opposite.

"It's not always easy," she said kneeling down behind him and resting her elbows on his shoulders. He didn't flinch away from her

touch; he didn't even become the littlest bit rigid—she was a little surprised, but she felt the need to be close to him then, her own emotions turning glum, "There are some people who I can never forgive."

He said nothing to this, but sat quietly, letting her drape her arms over his shoulders, giving him a small hug from behind. She could sense a dark mood hanging around him, like a thick veil. She smiled a bittersweet smile, the acceptance of her gesture making her feel like he was beginning to accept her, but the bitterness was rooted in the vast distance that still remained between them.

"Like who?" he uttered gruffly after a spell of silence.

She sat up slowly, retracting her arms from where they were draped over his shoulders. A small sigh escaped her as she did so, her heart feeling heavy for him.

"Like Itachi," she murmured quietly, "for taking away your innocence, for taking away everyone you loved, and for making you suffer the pains of loneliness."

He stiffed slightly at this, but said nothing. From where she was sitting, she could see the curse mark branded quite clearly on his lower neck, the black marks contrasting against his skin. The seal on it was different now, the ring around it looping and curling to form an intricate, yet barbed wreath. She hadn't really gotten a chance to look at the permanent seal since it had been put on him. It looked beautiful, in a dark and twisted way.

"Like Orochimaru," she continued, reaching for the curse mark and tracing the pattern with her index finger, "For giving you this, and taking you away from the village."

She dropped her hand away and after letting out a sigh, she pulled away from him, crawling to sit next to him. She tried wrapping her arms around one of his, but he moved it so instead his arm was securely around her waist; if it had been any other time, the gesture

would have surprised her, but now, it barely registered. Leaning against him, she looked out over the yard, feeling the warmth of his shoulder against his cheek. The scene grew blurry before her as tears came to her eyes, distorting her vision.

"Like myself," she finished with a shaky whisper, using all her will power to keep the tears from falling, "For being unable to stop you from going."

Without a word, he raised his hand to his shoulder—towards her face. He maneuvered his hand carefully, and his fingertips brushed close to the corner of her eye, causing her to blink reflexively. As soon as she did so, the tears came tumbling out from under her lids, streaking down her face. Before she could wipe them away, Sasuke moved his hand quickly again, brushing his fingers against her cheek, and feeling the wetness there. Withdrawing his hand, he held it about a foot away from her face, presenting the tears that glinted on his fingertips.

She took a shuddering sigh, and reached out with her left hand, lacing his fingers delicately through his. The tears were cool and wet against her skin as he closed his fingers over her hand, clasping it gently in his. She examined their adjoined hands for a moment, observing the way their fingers intertwined; the tears glinting on the back of her hand and on his fingertips; the way her slender and narrow hand fit nicely into his larger, strong one.

After a moment she released herself from his grasp, detangling herself from the hold he had on her waist, disentangling her fingers from his. She stood up and prepared herself to head back inside.

"I'm going to make some supper," she said, starting to move on again.

Sasuke suddenly turned and caught her wrist, and she halted abruptly in surprise. Turning her head, Sakura looked at him with mild surprise; the expression on his face was serious and a slight frown was building on his face. It was like he was struggling to say

something—or to at least bring himself to actually say was what on his mind. After a delayed period of silence, she squeezed his hand, smiling sadly. The mere action of grabbing her wrist meant something to her, he didn't have to say anything.

"Don't hate yourself, Sasuke," she said to him, "It's almost just as bad as not being able to forgive yourself. —And I would know; I've felt both."

And with that, she tugged free of his grasp, entering the household, leaving Sasuke sitting silently on the porch, his sightless eyes facing out over the yard.

A/N: Okay! Another chapter done! I'm quite proud of myself. Today, while I was supposed to be working on my work in Bio class, I drew up a short little outline of the whole story, dividing it into arcs and how much of the story each arc encompassed. I've determined that there are five arcs in this story. The first arc is the "Hospital Arc" which is basically chapters one to eleven—taking up about one sixth of the story. We are currently in the "Training Arc" which is of course, training Sasuke up again while he's blind. This arc has two parts, and this chapter signifies the end of the first portion of the "Training Arc." When this current arc is finished, it should take up about a third of the story. After that, there are three more arcs, which I won't label because of spoiler issues :D

Anyways, please review!

Chapter 23

A/N: There was some confusion about Flower-chan in the previous chapter. Yes, she's the unknown member, yes she's a girl, and yes she's called Flower-chan because of her hair accessory. Until further information is acquired about her personality and/or background, all information on her here is fictional. And please excuse any excess errors in this chapter—my editor is away on vacation.

Edit 11/07: Changing all the "Flower-chan" parts to include Konan's real name. Seems better that way.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Genjutsu Revisited

"Okay, this is how things are going to work," Sakura told Sasuke as they stood in the middle of Training Ground Three—a place that was now their primary training ground, "You've been training with Naruto in jutsus, you've been training with me in chakra. I think it's time to put together what you've accomplished in the fight that we're going to have right here."

She crossed her arms and faced him, a wide smile on her face. It was yesterday that her father left, and yesterday that the disagreement between them had passed. Now that Sasuke was no longer angry with her, she herself felt her spirits lifted; to add to her good mood, it was a nice summer day.

"So, I can use anything? Ninjutsu, taijutsu, or genjutsu?" he asked her uncertainly.

"That's right," she replied, her smile fading at the dubious look on his face, "I can manage, trust me—don't go passing me off as weak, too."

"I won't," was all he said in reply to that comment, "When do we begin?"

"Now sound good to you?" she asked, taking up a fighting stance.

At that remark, he instantly crouched into a defensive stance, listening carefully to catch any movement from her. After a moment he gave a short nod of the head, and that was enough for Sakura to know she could begin attacking.

She was used to being on the offense in these fights with him, but this time she held her ground, waiting for him to make the first move. Splitting her mind in two, she let one half of her run over a number of tactics she could initiate while the other half was watching him carefully for any sign of attack. It would be unwarranted to use genjutsu on him to start, Inner Sakura reasoned, because she didn't think he'd had any practice on getting out of them since they started the chakra detection. She could use ninjutsu or taijutsu against him, but depending on what he did first would determine which kinds she should use in retaliation. Her mind then wandered to which kinds of attacks she should use to counter different attacks he would use.

Neither of them moved for several minutes, silence blanketing thicker and thicker with each passing second—neither of them relaxed their stances. Well, if he was going to be that way, she would attack first, but only make it a short offensive to goad him into attacking back.

She rushed forwards towards him, and he braced himself for her attack. A small smirk came to her face as she began performing the hand signs for a replication jutsu—it was time to see how far he had gotten. Now instead of one of her, there were now three, and unlike elemental clones, chakra was not distributed evenly between them. This would confuse him she hoped because he would have to rely more on his other senses to detect the replications—but if he could see through that attack, it was even better.

As the three replications dashed forwards, all stopped and paused as he suddenly disappeared from in front of them. One of the replications suddenly disappeared in a puff of smoke and she realized what he was doing—he was moving in a large ring to take them out one of at a time. Having little time to think she made the hand signs for a replacement jutsu, quickly hiding herself in the nearest foliage as a log suddenly appeared where she was standing not too long ago.

As long as Sasuke did not have the Sharingan, he could not discern her moves until she actually initiated them. Normally he would have been able to tell what she was doing just based on her beginning movements, but now he was reduced to her level—guessing. A small feeling of triumph washed over her as she watched the last replication go up in smoke, a log lying where she herself had been, Sasuke standing where he had been at the beginning of the fight.

Unfortunately that triumph was short-lived as suddenly she saw shuriken flying towards her—cursing herself, she realized that she couldn't hide from him, he knew exactly where she was. She had been stupid to forget that—of course a replacement jutsu wouldn't work. Leaping clear just at the last second landed neatly on the ground, and immediately had to focus chakra to her arms as she held them up to block an incoming punch from Sasuke. He had dashed in so quickly that she hadn't even had a chance to attack. She leapt back further using chakra in her feet to repel her from the ground, sending her farther back than she could ever leap normally.

She was back in the trees now, which would not at all be advantageous—or fair—to Sasuke, seeing as he would be able to detect her, but not the trees around him. Dashing nimbly in a zigzagged pattern through the trees she made her way to the clearing again, Sasuke pivoted on the spot in order to face her again, keeping in a good vantage point. She held her ground, her fists raised up in preparation for any attack, and she found herself panting slightly.

"I now understand how you always managed to keep my blows from breaking your bones," he told her from where he was standing, neither of their guards dropping, "You focus your chakra into different parts of your body in order to cushion the force of the attack."

If he was trying to distract her, she was not fooled, she analyzed each movement with a critical eye, and even as she spoke, she was aware of each slight change. She smiled slightly in pride as he was able to correctly identify her technique—he could probably detect the way she focused her chakra. Well, it was an improvement, but it made the fight just that more difficult for her.

After a few moments of standing still, he launched into a series of hand signs, performed too quickly for her to tell what they were. Whatever it was, it was probably nasty; chakra guard or no, it only protected against taijutsu, and to ninjutsu she was very vulnerable. The only hand sign she caught was the last one, the seal of the tiger, and she dodged away just in time as tongues of flame made their way towards her. One grazed the side of her arm, searing the skin and causing an acrid odor of burnt flesh to float into the air. He was too fast, she had seen him move, but it was too late to do anything about it by the time she realized it. Luckily the fires were not as fast as him, and she had managed to get out of the way in time.

It was then that he made a mistake—he hesitated a moment in concern for her, the smell of her burned skin no doubt detected by his keen senses. Taking advantage of his faltering, she suddenly launched herself forwards, her fist raised to punch him in the face. Chakra was condensed heavily into her clenched hand, and as she approached him, she was surprised that he hadn't moved at all. Was he still concerned for her? Even though she was burned, he shouldn't assume that she was going to be held back by that.

Just as her fist was about to hit his face, he dodged, shifting his body to the side; the dodge had been at the last second that she couldn't reverse or redirect her attack, and she had been caught by mild surprise. But what had surprised her the most was not the dodge, nor the speed, but in fact that he had dodged to the opposite side of

what she was expecting. He had dodged to the side opposite her thrust-forward fist, to the side where her other arm was trailing slightly behind.

As she flew past him, he grabbed onto her other wrist, and as she came to the end of her punch, she found herself jerked sharply backwards. It was as she was being dragged back around that she realized he was intending on throwing her away from him. Inner Sakura was calculating her retaliation so quickly that everything around her seemed to be moving in slow motion. The timing had to be perfect, she thought as she was flung outwards. Soon...soon... now!

Just before he released her wrist, she twisted it around in his fist, grabbing onto his wrist just as he was letting go of hers. Instead of her flying outwards like he had intended, she continued to swing around on the pivot that was his arm. Twisting her body gracefully in the air, she maneuvered so that her feet were thrust in front of her, and as he lost his balance due to the surprise of being latched onto, she was swinging around behind him, his arm now trapping his body between his arm and her.

Her feet made firm contact with his back, knocking him quite effectively to the ground. As they were falling, she took her free arm and tapped him quite neatly on the back of the head, catching him in a genjutsu. His body fell to the ground, so caught up in the illusion that his physical body was thrown into a deep slumber. Jumping away from his body, she held a defensive stance, if he could break out of it, the fight could resume almost right away, and she did not want to be caught off guard.

A few minutes in, she realized that he wasn't going to get out of it any time soon. Sighing in slight disappointment, she knew that they needed to work on his genjutsu defense. Raising her hand to her burn, she healed the scorched tissue, reasoning that she might as well fix it before she broke the genjutsu. Viewing his unconscious form for a moment, she wondered what kind of illusion he was experiencing—the genjutsu she had cast on him was a trapping one,

not one where she actually used chakra to converse with his conscious mind. The skin on her arm healed, she walked over to his side, and kneeling down she put her index and middle fingers together, tapping his forehead lightly.

"Kai," she uttered, and a second or two after, his eyes opened, staring sightlessly at the sky above.

"I lost," he told her without emotion, and she knew he was frustrated.

"You still underestimate me," she replied evenly, "You hesitated after using the ninjutsu against me. I've suffered worse, Sasuke, so please don't worry about a light burn. If you hadn't paused, you probably could have kept the fight going for much longer."

"Hn," he grunted in reply and she just shook her head and smiled.

"If you want my honest opinion, I truly believe that you will be able to get to a chuunin level of shinobi if you keep practicing. We need to work on your genjutsu defense, but I think in a few months time you could be going on C-rank and B-rank missions," she told him seriously.

"In a few months?" he didn't sound pleased by the time it would take.

"Mm-hm," she gave a curt nod.

He paused for a moment. "Another fight," he told her firmly, "and no breaks today."

"That's fine," she told him, "I need to get better again—I don't want to waste time taking breaks."

He seemed surprised by this news, but did not argue, getting to his feet wordlessly. Her father's words rung in her head as she watched Sasuke take up a defensive stance across from her. She would not be weak—she would prove to her father that she was stronger than he perceived her to be, and with that thought planted firmly in her

mind, she took a stance that matched Sasuke's and prepared herself for the next onslaught of attacks.

"Are you sure you should leave him there on the ground like that, Sakura-san?" Lee inquired in a slightly uncertain fashion.

Lowing the water canteen from her lips, the said pink-haired kunoichi turned her gaze to where Lee was looking over at, a small smile coming to her lips, "He's fine—nothing bad will happen to him in that state. I don't think things could take a turn for the worse, unless either of us decide to pick on him while he's vulnerable."

"If you believe that he will be all right..." Lee stated with concern, a hesitant frown coming to his face, the bushy eyebrows almost coming together on his knitted forehead.

"Don't worry, Lee-san," Sakura found herself emphasizing with a laugh, "This is a regular occurrence, he knew it was going to happen. If he manages to wake up, well, I'll just have to put him out of it again. We just wait for him to regain consciousness, and in the meantime we'll train."

She looked over at the green-clad youth, her hand stubbornly on her hip. He was now gazing at the limp body with slightly raised eyebrows, still seeming unsure of what to make of the situation. The two of them were of course talking about none other than Sasuke, who was lying out cold under a tree at the location of Training Ground Three.

Shaking her head slightly, Sakura too looked at Sasuke as she put the cap back on the water canteen, amusement flickering behind her eyes. He was caught in a genjutsu, and was trying his best to get out of—well, that was what he was supposedly doing, though outwardly his body was rather unresponsive to the surroundings. Looking at him where he was now, the shade of the tree was covering half of his body, half his face in shadow, while the other half was in light. The way the leaves' shadows were scattered over his face reminded

Sakura horribly of the curse mark, and an involuntary shiver ran down her spine. She turned her attention back to Lee.

"The worst that can happen to Sasuke is that he'll get sunburned," she said with a smile, "And that would be awkward because he would burn unevenly at the rate the shadows are shifting off his face."

Lee gave a good-natured smile and turned his attention back to her, "Well, if you are certain this is fine, Sakura-san. I must confess that when you told me Sasuke-kun would be practicing his genjutsu defenses, this was not what I had had envisioned."

"He's been doing this all week," she commented in an assuring manner, putting the water canteen aside with a backpack that contained their lunch, "Trust me, this is quite normal. I just got bored of sitting around waiting for Sasuke to break free as the genjutsu became harder. He's not bad with genjutsu, but he's more of a ninjutsu type—so this is a little challenging for him."

Another week had passed since her fight against Sasuke the previous Thursday, and now it was the third week in August, the days seeming to pass slowly and quickly at the same time. Chakra detection was now officially out of the way, as he now had the ability to detect her without having to concentrate much. Ninjutsu was not a problem, and taijutsu seemed just as well—all training was now revolving around genjutsu and his defensive abilities. Not only that, but she had taken to setting up traps for him, and in the evenings she would take his hand and scrawl messages across his palm for practice. But the summer days were long and often they were out until sundown at nine to ten in the evening.

While he had improved on everything, he was still struggling slightly with breaking out of genjutsu. To gain a scope on where he stood with genjutsu, she told him to put one of his own on her, to see what level he had attained in his absence. While he had not used any genjutsu before he had left Konoha, she was not surprised that he now had some to use. However she was surprised to discover that

his genjutsu abilities were just below jounin level—she had expected something much higher, seeing as his ninjutsu were obviously ANBU level. It hadn't taken much for her to get out of his illusion—she was able to break out of Tsunade and Kurenai's genjutsu without too much difficulty, so Sasuke's simple slightly-higher-than-chuunin-level genjutsu was nothing. She quickly came to the conclusion that Sasuke needed some major work on illusionary techniques.

It had started out simple, a few easier ones applied to the back of the head; by regulating the amount of chakra put into the attack, she could vary the level of difficulty. Each time Sasuke was able to escape from a genjutsu, she would immediately swoop down and put it on him again. After three or four times of the same genjutsu, she would raise the bar a little, making it a little more difficult; however, Sasuke was making slower progress than she anticipated, not being too good with genjutsu, and sometimes it would take him hours to break out of one of her illusions. Of course that time had not been wasted—she had taken it upon herself to practice her own techniques, refining them and bringing them back up to their normal levels. It was only now, after a week of training, that she finally gathered the courage to ask Lee to spar with her, confident that she was almost as good as she had been before so that she would at least be a formidable adversary.

"So, shall we spar again, Lee-san?" Sakura asked, taking up a ready position.

He gave her a broad grin, a sharp nod, "Hai, Sakura-san! Let us begin!"

He hated genjutsu; it was official. Illusion after illusion after illusion—it was maddening. After a short week, Sasuke was now able understand how some people were driven to insanity because of techniques such as this. He hated genjutsu before, and each new illusion only enforced the belief that it was an understandable hatred.

He was standing on a small piece of floating earth in an endless black void. The darkness all around him was different from his blind state, as there was depth to the landscape around him, and on occasion purple and pale yellow pulsations would flicker in the distance. It was cold in the void, and it smelled dank. It was damp this time too. He hated the damp.

Putting his fingers together in the seal of the sheep, he tried his best to cut off the flow of chakra in his body, "Kai!"

Nothing happened; he growled angrily. It was so unbelievably frustrating—the mere concept of breaking one's chakra flow was rather simple. It wasn't too hard to accomplish while in the real world, but here was an entirely different matter. He knew that every time he tried to sever the flow, he was focused on his illusionary body—he knew that he was in an illusion; he knew his body was unconscious, but his subconscious mind wouldn't allow it to register. He was unable to connect the act of breaking chakra flow with the concept of his real body, not the illusionary one; connecting the two very real concepts in the world of illusions was difficult.

' *Damn!*' he swore quietly in his mind. He hadn't practiced all week with Sakura, being thrown into continuous worlds of unpleasantness, for nothing. Yes, unpleasant—it couldn't be anything else but. It seemed like from the first time Sakura had tried that experiment on him, involving the field of green, she had been afraid he would lose himself to the illusion, and not want to break out of it at all. As a result, each illusion had something unpleasant about it, as if to try to deter him from staying and to motivate him to leave. The first one had left him knee-deep in mud, while another had carried the distinct odor of rotten eggs. Sakura needn't have worried, though, he noted grumpily, he knew the ramifications of staying in a genjutsu.

Not only was it a fake world, which consisted mostly of your own mind being influenced by a stream of your own chakra, but also it caused your physical body to fall unconscious. If he did not break out of it, his physical body could potentially starve to death if he, or someone else, did not disrupt the flow. Furthermore, his mind was

full of dark deep memories, and the last thing he needed was for his own chakra to remind him of the darkest corners of his mind. Additionally, he knew he had to get better with his defenses; otherwise it would be so simple to get caught in a genjutsu cast by his brother. Sakura had said that if he could break out of the strongest of genjutsu that came in from behind him, he could escape any genjutsu—save for kekkei genkai.

He had thought long and hard about that concept. The Mangekyou Sharingan was a bloodline ability that a victim could not escape—a unique ability to the Uchiha clan, and the Uchiha clan alone, however... Perhaps because he had the same inherited ability as Itachi, could he potentially break out of it because of that genetic link? He did not know, neither did he want to test it out. However if he could possibly achieve the ability to break out of any illusion, he may have a chance against Itachi's Mangekyou world, if he were to accidentally become ensnared in it. There was also the fact that the Mangekyou was a doujutsu—he didn't know if it would fail to work now because he was blind.

"Kai!" he shouted to the dim darkness of the world around him, keeping firmly in mind the reason why he was enduring the illusionary techniques he hated.

Nothing changed.

...Again then.

"Kai!"

Again.

"Kai!"

The dampness evaporated around him; the pulsing lights faded, the world becoming dark and without perspective; he wasn't standing anymore, but lying on his back. He had gotten out. Wind blew gently over him, and warmth was basking steadily on him—he could hear

birds chirping and the leaves clattering loudly above him; the smell of grass reached his nose. He observed all these things without seeing them. Aside from those factors, there were two chakra presences that he detected close by—the one he recognized right away, the other one was less familiar.

Sakura was sparring Rock Lee; apart from the sound of blows being thrown about, he could sense Sakura molding her chakra to block and defend against swipes being hurled in her direction.

As he lay there, sensing how she molded her chakra, he realized how much the training in chakra sensing had helped him in determining attacks and how to block efficiently; it had also shed light on to the mystery of how Sakura managed to block his blows unscathed. He could sense her chakra moving throughout her body as she focused it to places where he would hit her—the chakra cushioned the blows, and thereby left her without injury. He was impressed, to say the least; now that he could determine her attacks, she had revealed a whole new set of tactics to him, and it began to dawn on him how skilled of a kunoichi she had become—and how much she had been holding back on him.

By the sounds of things, they hadn't realized that he had broken out of the genjutsu, and seeing as he hadn't moved or even opened his eyes, it was quite understandable. Lying on the ground, he did nothing to indicate that he was now back in the world of reality—wanting to delay the next genjutsu prison, if only for a few minutes.

"Very good, Sakura-san!" Lee called out in praise, right after Sasuke had sensed him leap a sizable distance away from her, Sakura's chakra lashing fiercely at the retreating young man.

The concept of using chakra to block and enhance one's ability, the idea was actually quite obvious now, he mused, he should have realized earlier. Reflecting on Sakura was like putting pieces of a puzzle together, all the pieces were there, but it was matter of seeing the entire picture. He should have realized right away what Sakura was doing with her chakra, seeing as he knew she had the ability to

control it that well. The pieces were there... But then there were some that he didn't know where they fit, like her opponent for instance. Where did the pet student of Maito Gai fall into the picture that was Sakura's past?

If he had to admit it, he would secretly confess that he had been a little affronted when Sakura told him that Lee would be training with her that day while he worked on genjutsu—slightly irritated even. The youthful man's presence was bothering him a bit, and Sasuke secretly wished that he wasn't there. Of course he didn't have to admit it to anyone, so he was doing his best not to allow himself be aware of his irritation, however it was proving difficult because he wasn't entirely sure what the annoyance was based upon.

"You have made excellent progress so far today, Sakura-san!" came another comment of praise as the fight sounded like it was drawing to a close, "I think you are doing even better than the last time we sparred like this."

Sakura's chakra returned to its original form as she released her grasp on it. "Oh, I don't know about that, Lee-san," she replied with a light laugh, "There's still plenty of room for improvement."

Had she had a rest since her training began? Sasuke found himself wondering. Sakura had been very committed to her recent training—not that Sasuke was conscious for most of her day, but that wasn't the point. The point was that Sakura should not over-work herself—why? So that she didn't strain herself too hard before their mission in October. His primary concern was if Lee was overworking Sakura, and not permitting her to take breaks.

"Do not speak so harshly of yourself, Sakura-san," Lee said with disapproval, "You know that the Lotus of Konoha blooms twice, but Konoha's Cherry Blossom never fades."

As Sakura gave a musical laugh, Sasuke found himself frowning slightly at the comment. Was Lee flirting with her? Sakura herself seemed comfortable with the comment, having laughed in a flattered

manner—she had never gone out with anyone before, but that didn't mean nobody had tried to ask her. Maybe she was used to this kind of treatment, but brushed it aside to deter any further pursuit.

Why was he letting this bother him? The other side of his mind had stepped in and firmly reminded him that it wasn't any of his business. Sakura wanted to train harder and she was stubborn enough to stick to that task, flirtatious comments or no.

"I'm flattered that you believe that, Lee-san," Sakura was now saying, "But the length a cherry-blossom blooms is actually a rather short-lived time period. Let's just hope that it's not saying something about my skill."

' *Or your life,* ' were the words that drifted across Sasuke's mind in an absent addition. A split second later, the words registered and he opened his eyes in shock. The memory of his nightmare, in which Sakura was killed by his brother, came flooding back to him in a wave of abject horror. He sat up sharply, shaking his head slightly, firmly reminding himself again the purpose of his revenge. It was to keep things like that from happening.

"Oh, Sasuke," his movement had caught Sakura's attention, "Welcome back—that only took you three hours this time. You're improving."

Giving a sharp nod he mentally cursed at his slow time. Well, it was half an hour shorter than before. He couldn't afford to sit around and listen to Sakura converse with Lee—he was not getting any stronger that way.

"Well then," Sakura said lightly as he sensed and heard her draw near to him, "Again, then."

A tap on the back of his head was the last thing he felt before the endless void returned again. Damn, he really did hate genjutsu.

The halls echoed with Itachi's loud footfalls, verberating noisily off the rock walls and ricocheted down the lengths of vast caverns stretching out ahead and behind him. He normally would not have made so much noise, but he was in a hurry today, and he needed to speak with *her* before she moved from her known location—said current known location was the favoured hangout of Akatsuki's members.

The hangout was nothing particularly special, it was in fact just a store room where most food supplies were kept, and someone—nobody knew who—had turned it into a makeshift mess hall. After its discovery, other little additions had been put on, like a small bar counter which had been as a sort of joke at the time but had quickly grown in popularity. The last that Itachi had heard, that was where the person he was looking for was—and he wasn't the least bit surprised.

Konan was her real name, though not many people had known it when Akatsuki had first been founded, she didn't particularly like to give it out to people, and she had kept it secret for as long as possible. Even though now her real name was well known wherever Akatsuki set up base, few people who were higher up in rank called her that. She was known either as the "Messenger of God", "God's Angel" or "Flower-chan." The latter being doted upon her by Deidara, a direct reference to the white paper rose she kept pinned in her hair. She wasn't particularly fond of the nickname, but it had stuck and it became one of the things that she responded to—very few people called her by anything else. Itachi was one of those very few people, he refused to call her the ridiculous nickname, and in the rare times that he spoke to her, he used her real name, which she seemed comfortable enough with.

Drawing up to the door that opened up to the hangout, he opened the door, peering inside, his Sharingan eyes telling him that there was someone there. She was sitting on a tall crate—one of the many crude barstools—her elbows on the counter, swirling an alcoholic beverage in a wineglass. She was sitting with her back straight and

the bangs of her azure hair hung slightly in front of her face, preventing him from seeing if she had glanced over at him. Her one hand was playing with the white flower that was tied in her hair.

As he approached her, she shifted slightly, glancing over at him, and upon realizing who it was, a mischievous smile played on her lips.

"I've almost forgotten what you look like," she told him with an air of scolding, running one of her slender fingers along the rim of her glass, "You don't call...write...anything."

"I have been preoccupied of late," he replied calmly; now that he had located her, he was no longer in a hurry.

"Hmm," she hummed, peering at him from over the rim of her glass as she sipped from it, "So I've heard...and seen. But couldn't you have come around one night?"

"I have not had any time," he replied evenly, and she gave an indignant noise.

Konan was Akatsuki's gatherer of information, a spy who could do her job without leaving too much of a mess—meaning that she limited her kill count to one or two people per mission, or more specifically, one or two *men*. She had once belonged to the Village Hidden in Clouds, and was known as the 'Kumo's Spymaster', but was now more commonly known as 'Akatsuki's Black Widow'. Spinning a web of well-chosen words she would lure her victims into telling her whatever she needed, and did whatever required in order to persuade the informant to give that information. She was no different from other black widows, and often the mate would be dead before dawn broke on the horizon. So far though, none of Akatsuki's members were found dead in bed.

"Yes well, Deidara's good company, I suppose," she mused, standing up and fixing his gaze with an aqua-irised stare, poking his chest with her index finger, "But I'm getting bored with him. You know you're my favourite—you keep things interesting..."

His relationship with Konan was no more intimate than the next man's, other than succumbing to occasional urges, he did not often associate with her, or she with him. He knew that she had relationships with other men in the organization, but he would not have stooped so low as to call her Akatsuki's whore. A picky woman who could hold her own against any unwanted advances, Konan did not choose just anyone to 'entertain' her. Itachi knew for a fact that Hidan would have been dead if he was capable of dying; she refused to even let Kisame touch her and often she would pretend Kakuzu did not exist. Zetsu and Sasori were the only ones who hadn't tried advancing on her and she seemed perfectly fine with it—she had no interest in 'freaks of nature'. Tobi on the other hand was too naïve to even put two and two together on what was going on.

"I have had matters to attend to," he told her evenly, and she gave an impish smile, "I need you to do something for me."

Turning away, she walked over to another storage crate and sat down on it, crossing her legs, revealing a smooth slender calf. "Oh? In what respect?" she said suggestively, taking another sip from her near-empty glass.

"I leave today for the retrieval mission with Kisame, and I want you to watch over the Jinchuuriki that is under my care while I am away," he told her, striding slowly to her location, closing the gap between them.

"Why?" she asked, sounding genuinely surprised, "She seems in good enough health to me—she should be fine while you are gone."

"Her seal is unstable, I believe that her fear of the other members would cause it to bring out the demon. If it were a shorter duration of time, I would not ask you to do this, but it will take months" he explained lightly, "I wish for you to watch over her for security's sake."

She paused, swirling the liquid around in her glass thoughtfully, staring off into space for a while, "How loose is the seal?"

"I do not know, but I think it would be best to let the answer to that question remain unanswered—I would rather not discover the hard way."

Silent for a minute more, she drained her drink in one final gulp, before a twisted grin pulled at the corner of Konan's lips. "She doesn't like me very much," she turned her gaze to meet his, "Haven't you seen her when she sees me speaking with you? I've seen that look many times..."

He said nothing in response to her comment; she ran her fingers through her azure tresses and her grin widened as the silence drew on.

"Surely you've noticed: she's jealous."

"It does not matter what she feels—if she can bring up the courage to dislike you, she doesn't fear you as she does the others," he told her without emotion or care, "Her dislike of you will amount to nothing; you know her fate."

"Fine, fine," Konan waved a dismissive hand at him, "I'll watch her, but then you owe me a visit."

"I told you, I am—"

"—Busy. I know—so make time," told him, standing up leaning closer to him, "You can't tell me she needs you around at all times."

"No."

"When do you leave?" she asked him, sliding her hands underneath his cloak and wrapping his arms around him, narrowing the already small distance between them, "There could be time now..."

"We leave now," he told her impassively.

"Hm, too bad," was her murmured reply, her nose brushing against his, "You'd better tell her to get any belongs she has together."

"She's moved them already," he told her inexpressively, ignoring her advances on him.

"It's a good thing that I like you, Itachi," she said pulling away from him with a frown, the tone of her voice changing to match her expression, "Anyone else won't get off as easily as you."

He reached out and tugged on a lock of her cerulean hair, twisting his fingers through it, "I suppose I am fortunate then."

She swatted his hand away in an irritated matter, but he knew she wasn't angry—she wouldn't have used his real name if she were. It was a game of hers: she would pretend to be angry, back talk him with sarcastic and grouchy remarks, then stop speaking to him, and then finally resume speaking as if she had never been affronted to begin with—which she never was. His only role in the game was to wait it out—that was all.

"Have a safe journey," she said lightly, walking across the room and out the door, "You owe me double now."

He followed after her, slightly amused by the doubling of his debt, knowing that it was a reward on both their parts. She stopped in the doorway and waited for him to catch up to her before poking him in the chest again.

"Be careful," she told him and he knew it was more of a formality than anything else—they both knew he would be fine.

"Your concern is unneeded."

"Good—I'd hate for you to return terribly disfigured," she said lightly, and he stared at her, causing her to give a light laugh, "Say hello to Sushi for me."

And with that she turned down the hall and disappeared into the looming darkness, a light bounce in her step. A mysterious woman,

he noted with a shake of the head, before he too turned and proceeded in the opposite direction.

It was the combination of her fingers against Sasuke's forehead along with her applied chakra that allowed Sakura to bring him out of the genjutsu that he was currently trapped in. He would freeze slightly, and then slowly his body would relax and his eyes slide open, open yet unable to see. She didn't like bringing him out of genjutsu, because she felt that to him it was a painful reminder that he was unable to see, to bring him from an illusion of sight and return him to the reality of blindness. This time was no different, and he lay on the ground quietly for a moment.

"Why'd you bring me out of the genjutsu?" he asked her, sitting up slowly dusting off the back of his head, shaking free any stray pieces of grass that might have gotten caught.

"It's getting late—this one was taking you longer than before," she replied mellowly, feeling tired from the day's training; she had worked harder than all the other days, and it was now beginning to show, her adrenaline rush dying away.

"Where's Maito Gai's student?" he asked with a frown, most likely searching for another chakra signature that wasn't there.

"Lee-san? He left, but not before leaving behind an invite to ramen," she replied wanting to sit down on the grass next to Sasuke and wrap her arms around his, "That's why I had to break you out of the illusion—got places to go."

He had stiffened slightly at this comment, and after a moment of contemplation, uttered a gruff: "Have fun."

"What do you mean 'have fun'?" she inquired, confusion coming to her face at his statement, "You're coming too."

"Am I?" he asked, raising an eyebrow slightly.

"Of course! Naruto wouldn't be happy if you bailed out on his invite," she confirmed, wondering why on earth he thought his wasn't going, "We're to meet him, Lee, and Hinata at seven this evening. Why on earth did you think you weren't going?"

"Never mind," he replied, giving a brisk shake of the head, "I misunderstood what you said."

She stared at a moment, replaying her words in her head to see how he had misunderstood them. Well, she supposed the way she had worded her phrases left out the fact that they were both going—that much made sense. Yet he sounded... She couldn't find the word for it; he wasn't displeased, but his gruff manner suggested that it was like he was trying to ignore the idea that she was going alone. Two seconds later it clicked, and a small smile came to her face.

"Sasuke, you thought I was invited for dinner with Lee-san, didn't you?" she offered, putting on a lighter tone, a slight teasing in her voice.

"Hn," was his neutral reply.

"You were jealous, weren't you?" she continued, reaching out and poking his cheekbone playfully.

"No," he replied in an annoyed tone, a defensive frown on his face, turning away from her so that her finger disconnected with his face.

"I think you were," she persisted, a grin contrasting his frown.

"I was not," he stated stubbornly and she made a face at him, even though he couldn't see it.

"You're no fun to tease, Sasuke," she pouted good-humoredly, "You take things too seriously."

He said nothing in response to this, but gave remained resolutely silent, waiting for her to get her teasing done with. The grin on her

face faded to a light smile and she wondered briefly if he actually was jealous. Inner Sakura was squealing enthusiastically at the thought that it might be true. After all, he didn't know that she hadn't dated anyone in his absence—maybe she thought that she did bothered him. But then again, she didn't want him thinking ill of Lee either; Inner Sakura faltered in her bout of happiness. Best let sleeping dogs lie, she reminded herself, best not touch things that could potentially go foul. Besides, this was *Sasuke* —what were the chances that he was actually jealous? Very slim, Inner Sakura noted.

"Come on, Sasuke," she said, tapping his shoulder and straightening up herself, "We're going to be late at this rate."

"Wait," he told her, getting to his feet, putting a hand on her arm to indicate that he wanted her to remain stationary, "Spar me once first."

"We're going to be late," she told him uncertainly, but he shook his head at her.

"Just once," he told her, getting into a ready position.

"...Fine," she replied with a smile, taking up the stance as well, "Begin."

A/N: Before any of you tell me that this was fillerish chapter, I already know. I was going to have some of the really important stuff in here, but it didn't work out that way. All the important bits are going to happen next chapter. Initially they were supposed to happen here, but unless you feel like reading a twenty-five-page chapter, it won't work.

Oh, and when Flower-chan said "Sushi" she was referring to Kisame. I've decided that she had nicknames for all the members of Akatsuki. Bit like Kanaye that way I guess, but it's different.

P.S. Here's a little Easter egg/spoiler for those of you who actually take the time to read my author's notes. In the next chapter it will be revealed the way that Sasuke manages to get almost perfectly around his blindness. Be excited ;)

Chapter 24

A/N: I'd like to say that due to recent events that have taken place in the real world, I will not be able to update next Wednesday as everyone would like. I know it will be a great disappointment to many when I say that I will be putting this story, and most of my internet life, on hold until around the end of August. I will not go in depth about my reasons, but it is mostly due to the stresses that come with neglect of responsibility.

Chapter Twenty-Four: Prodigy and the Prodigal Son

The smell of ramen was beginning to irritate Sasuke as he sat at the counter of Ichiraku's ramen joint. The scents were so familiar to him now, having come here at least once a week with Naruto, it was hard for them not to be; in fact he was getting a little sick of ramen at this point, and his current grouchy temperament made it seem to taste more sour than usual. To his right, Sakura was socializing lightly with the others who were present, while he himself was silent. He was feeling both peevish and silent at the moment due to the fact that, once again, he had lost to Sakura.

Five months—for five months he had been blind, and for four of those five months he had been training with Sakura. August was drawing to a close, the mission they were to receive was little over a month away, and he didn't feel ready for it. While he had progressed significantly since the very start of his blindness, he knew that as soon as he was introduced to a new location, he was going to end up completely dependant on Sakura again—ignorant of his new surroundings. Because of that, he knew he would wind up being more of a burden and a contribution to the team.

What could be done about this? He had the potential to grow back to their level; Sakura had been working with him to achieve success,

yet he still could not consider himself equal to her in combat. What was holding him down? If he looked at all the aspects, perhaps he would find the primary source of his dismal performances, and get around the issue.

Of course his blindness was the primary source of his difficulties, but there wasn't much that could be done about that. His sight was the most vital of his senses, but what had made it that way? Why was it so important? He was able to perceive his enemies attacks and retaliate before they could launch them against him. Even though his experience with sound and chakra gave him an insight as to what was possibly coming, he still couldn't predict the attacks as well; windy days and foliage also lowered his chances of his success. He could hold his own against Naruto and Sakura—so he wasn't entirely helpless—but ultimately he couldn't win.

"Oi, teme," Naruto called out to him, bringing his attention back to the world around him, "You're too quiet, quit being anti-social!"

He turned his head slightly to everyone else to indicate that they had his attention. Sakura had stopped talking and was now speaking to him as well.

"You are being rather quiet, Sasuke," she added from beside him, her voice laced with concern, "Is something the matter?"

Wrong? Nothing was wrong—other than the fact that he was more than just a little frustrated about making quite pathetic progress. He shouldn't be here, he noted with an almost weary tone, ignoring the fact that he still hadn't answered the question. He should be out training, trying to keep getting better, devising ways to help himself get better than he already was. He couldn't afford to be here eating ramen, spending his time in the company of Rock Lee, Hyuuga Hinata, and Naruto, he should be—

His thoughts ground to a sudden stop and took a few steps backwards. Hinata... *Hyuuga* Hinata.

He suddenly got to his feet, and he could feel the stares of everyone as they looked at him in surprise.

"Sasuke...?" Sakura asked uncertainly, confused by his sudden actions.

"Hyuuga Hinata?" he asked, listening keenly to where he last heard her voice coming from.

There was a squeak of surprise from said Hyuuga at being addressed. "Um, y-yes?" came her nervous inquiry.

"Is Hyuuga Neji available at this time?" he asked, running his sudden revelation over in his head, his confidence in it growing with each passing second.

"Um, h-he should be..." she replied timidly, sounding mystified.

Sasuke reached out and tapped Sakura's shoulder with impatience, "We have to go."

"We...do?" she inquired, and he heard her get to her feet slowly.

"What the hell, teme?!" Naruto exclaimed indignantly, "You've barely been here! And you haven't even finished your ramen!"

"It's important," he told her, ignoring Naruto's exclamation.

"I'm sorry everyone," she told the group, sounding completely puzzled, "But *apparently* we have somewhere we need to be. Please excuse us."

"Do not worry Sakura-san," Sasuke heard Lee say empathetically, "I am sure Sasuke-kun has his reasons."

Sakura must have nodded or something, because the next words from here were directed at him, "Where are we going?"

"The Hyuuga Household," he told her briskly, leading her off in the general direction, hoping that she would take up the lead before he crashed into anything.

If his theory worked, he could possibly make a huge jump in his training, and may even be able to regain enough power to maybe be able to kill Itachi.

It was in a manner of confusion that Sakura found herself inquiring for Hyuuga Neji at the front door of the clan's complex on Sasuke's behalf. She had pestered him all along the way that to enlighten her on the reason for his sudden desire to see the Hyuuga prodigy, but he had refused to elaborate. A smirking grin was on his each time she asked, and he would tell her that she would find out when they got there. Even now, as they were being led down a hallway to where Neji was supposedly currently located, she found herself casting questioning looks at Sasuke, knowing that he would be unable to see her perplexity.

There was a satisfied kind of look on his face, and she didn't even have an inkling why. Of course some of it was for show, Sasuke's proud nature causing him to want to appear before Neji as an equal. His head was held high, his back straight, and if she had not been so confused about why they were even there to begin with, she probably would have teased him slightly about his attempt of making a good impression.

Their escort stopped before a room in the household and slid it open, wordlessly offering for them to enter. Complying, Sakura muttered a quiet thank you as then entered the room, where Neji sat. He was sitting at a low table, a pot of tea and a cup before him; he looked up at them as they entered. If he was surprised by their appearance, he did not show it.

"Sakura-san," he greeted politely, "Uchiha."

"Hyuuga," Sasuke replied evenly.

Whatever Sasuke wanted to see Neji about, it was bound to be entertaining to say the least. Both Neji and Sasuke were men of few words, and to watch the two of them actually converse, where they would both be required to speak more than they normally would—this could possibly be the most she would ever hear them speak in one sitting.

"Have a seat," Neji offered politely, extending his hand.

Nodding silently, Sakura led Sasuke forwards, and after making sure that he was comfortably seated, she herself sat at a place next to him, folding her hands politely on the table.

"Tea?" he offered, pouring another cup for himself.

"No, thank you," she replied raising her hand momentarily.

"What did you wish to speak to me about, Sakura-san?" Neji asked, addressing her, mistakenly thinking that she had been the one who wanted to talk to him.

Before she could even open her mouth to correct his mistake, Sasuke answered for her, "I am the one who needs to talk to you."

"I see," Neji answered after turning his gaze to Sasuke, setting down the teapot, "And what did *you* wish to speak to me about?"

"As you know, generations ago, the Hyuuga clan and the Uchiha clan were once one clan," replied said Uchiha, getting right to the point, sitting so that he faced straight ahead, his sightless gaze coincidentally falling right on Neji, "Over time the clan split apart, the genetics of the doujutsu that had once been one technique split into the Byakuugan and the Sharingan, forming the two distinct clans."

"I am aware of this," Neji stated evenly, eying Sasuke critically, "Why are you bringing this to my attention?"

"While now they are almost completely different abilities, they are still connected by the bond they shared when both techniques were under one clan. Some aspects of both doujutsu may be connected by that previous history," Sasuke answered evenly, and Sakura too now studied him with interest, her curiosity sparking, "As I understand it, the Byakuugan allows the user to see almost completely three hundred-sixty degrees around them, preventing them from falling to attacks from behind."

"This is true," Neji replied sipping his tea; Sakura was amazed by their bluntness and straightforwardness. Neither of them was saving any words for pleasantries, mincing their words.

"The genetic aspects combined with chakra allows this come about, correct?" Sasuke asked, and deep within her mind, Sakura started to follow where he was going with this.

"Yes."

"I believe that because the Byakuugan and the Sharingan were once linked, there may be a possibility that my Sharingan genetic code may be able to permit me to perform something of a similar fashion," Sasuke finished, folding his hands neatly in front of him.

"Of course," Sakura found herself interjecting with wonder, and Sasuke turned his head slightly to listen to her, "While you may not have your vision, the ability to use chakra for sensing your surroundings does not have to be done with your eyes... And with the grasp you have on chakra..."

"It would be a simple manner of extending that knowledge to incorporate the Sharingan's genetic coding," Sasuke finished for her, nodding slightly before turning his head forwards again, "That is why I have come to see you, Hyuuga Neji."

"You wish for me to use my knowledge on the Byakuugan to help assist you in using your own doujutsu to sense your surroundings

using chakra," Neji filled in the gaps, fixing Sasuke with an analytical gaze.

"You are the Hyuuga prodigy—and there are no living Uchihas who would possibly have any information on this aspect of the Sharingan," Sasuke replied evenly; Sakura felt a little saddened by the last comment, but Inner Sakura was bubbling with excitement over the concept Sasuke had put forth.

"That is assuming that a genetic property of that sort exists," Neji interpolated, "And I do not see why I should agree to assisting you. After all, I almost got killed on a mission to retrieve you, courtesy of one of Otogakure's jounin."

This definitely put a stopper in Inner Sakura's excitement and outwardly she frowned slightly at his response. That was true—on the retrieval mission that Naruto, Shikamaru, Chouji, Kiba and Neji had been sent on, everyone was almost killed; if the Sand Shinobi had not shown up to assist them, they might have all died. The other members of the team that had been sent on the mission seemed to think nothing of it, as it had happened so long ago, but perhaps Neji had always held a grudge. Even though Sasuke had returned to Konoha, he technically was still a traitor, and a criminal to the village. He had yet to work off his two thousand hour sentence.

"I left the village in hopes of attaining power, and as you can see, I have paid dearly for my mistake," Sasuke said, closing his sightless eyes, bowing his head downwards in a contemplative manner, "I do not expect you to trust me, nor to I deserve that trust. But I would not ask it of you if I believed that I did not need your assistance. I know I have wronged this village, seeking power that was right in front of me all this time, but I will not make that same mistake again."

Sakura masked her shocked look—this day was full of surprising behaviour from Sasuke. To have him admit that he made a mistake, and to Hyuuga Neji, someone who he had rivaled in the genin days, was a huge step; he really wanted Neji's help, even if he hadn't worded it that way. She glanced over at Neji apprehensively, trying to

interpret what could possibly be going through the man's mind, but it was as impassive as Sasuke's.

"I see," Neji replied, bowing his head slightly, "Then I accept, but only as long as I see fit."

"Done," Sasuke replied, and Sakura found herself breaking into a large smile.

"Thank you so much, Neji," she found herself saying, feeling overjoyed.

"When were you thinking of beginning your training?" the Byakuugan-user inquired calmly after extending a polite nod to Sakura.

"As soon as possible," Sasuke replied, "And as often."

"Very well," was the response to Sasuke's comment, "We begin tomorrow. I want you here by six."

"He'll be on time," Sakura said with an emphasizing nod—this must be what it feels like when the leaders of the villages scored a successful deal, she noted inwardly.

Sasuke began to get to his feet, and she linked her arm with his, after giving a respectful bow to Neji. Sasuke gave a polite nod before tugging subtly on her arm.

"Have a good day, Sakura-san—Sasuke," Neji told them as they left the room, "I will see you both in the morning."

It wasn't until they were outside the Hyuuga complex that Sakura threw her arms around Sasuke in an overwhelming hug of joy, barely able to contain herself. He seemed stunned at first, not used to being embraced so violently, but after a minute she felt him pat her back awkwardly. Releasing her grasp on him, she smiled up at him broadly, despite the fact that he could not see her joy; instead she

grasped both his hands in hers, running her thumbs over the back. She bounced enthusiastically up and down on the balls of her feet.

"Sasuke, that was just... *brilliant* !" she exclaimed happily, "I never would have thought of that in a million years! What a breakthrough! It could be the key to getting you back up to your regular level again!"

He raised his eyebrows at her behaviour and she just laughed, "Sorry, I must be freaking you out right now; it's just that..."

She knew she was smiling from ear to ear like an idiot, but she didn't care. She couldn't explain the happiness that was coursing through her—she knew that Sasuke was making good progress, but she had been a little doubtful whether he could carry on a B-ranked mission as he was. If he worked really hard, he should have little to no difficulty.

"This is assuming that my idea will work," he replied, grasping her hands firmly, as if frightened that she would slip away in her excited euphoria.

"I have a feeling it will," she grinned, suddenly dropping his hands again and embracing him, "This is it, I just know it—the key to getting around your blindness."

She looked up at him and on his face she could see the shadow of a true smile, lingering just behind his current expression. He was eager too, she knew, and probably just as hopeful as she was about it. She tightened her grasp on him just for a moment, letting out a small giggle.

"Almost had a smile there."

True to their word, Sasuke and Sakura came to the Hyuuga complex the very next morning—not only had they arrived on time, but Sasuke had made a point of showing up fifteen minutes early. The both of them were now sitting on what Sasuke assumed was on a

veranda that opened up into a sort of courtyard-styled yard in which they would be training—or at least that's where they had been instructed to wait. Sakura was swinging her legs back and forth, her heels hitting the sideboard rhythmically, a mellow air hanging about her as she hummed quietly to herself. It wasn't the lullaby that she was humming, but another familiar tune that he assumed she had found in the box of music his mother wrote. Other than the crash-course he had been put in briefly for regulations at the Sound Village, he had little to no experience with music; he'd have to get Sakura to sing all his mother's songs for him sometime.

Approaching footsteps accompanied by Neji's chakra signature alerted Sasuke that his instructor was drawing closer to them, and subconsciously he sat up a little straighter. A few seconds later, Neji came around the corner, announcing his presence by giving a polite 'good morning' to Sakura, and an even 'Sasuke' to himself. It was apparent to Sasuke that there was still a level of dislike towards him in regards to the mission involving his retrieval. The grudge would not have bothered him if it had not been for the fact that he needed Neji's help. To say the apology yesterday had been insincere would not be entirely true—he was sorry for his mistakes and what harm they had caused others, but he wouldn't have admitted it out loud if he hadn't needed Neji's assistance. At least Neji no longer called him 'Uchiha'.

Sakura got to her feet and helped him plant his feet firmly on the ground; the veranda at his house being much taller than the one he had at home.

"I don't know if you need me here or not," Sakura said uncertainly after making sure his footing was established.

"You are welcome to stay—I am sure there is some contribution that you could make to assist us," Neji told her evenly, "Medical ninjas require a good understanding of chakra, so I am sure your knowledge will be of some use."

Sakura moved slightly, and Sasuke assumed that she had nodded in reply—but that wasn't important, he was becoming more and more impatient on getting started on his training, having spent all the previous evening in agitation over the possibility of success.

"May we get started?" he asked as politely as he could—they didn't need to go through all this knit-picky greeting chitchat.

Neji took a few steps towards the two of them and hopped down off the veranda, landing almost silently next to Sasuke. He could sense the Hyuuga's gaze was resting steadily on him, as if studying, and after a moment, he took a few steps away.

"What you wish to accomplish is something similar to the Byakuugan's three-hundred-sixty degree vision," Neji started out, in a speculative manner, "I thought about this very thoroughly last night, taking into consideration how we may accomplish this. Of course I will have to explain to you some of the technicalities of the Byakuugan—and as a member of the Branch Family of the Hyuuga clan, I am sworn to protect some of those technicalities."

The last statement was stated with a bitterness that was barely detectable, yet there nonetheless. Sasuke said nothing in response to this; he was not particularly surprised, the fact that the Byakuugan secrets could not be shared had occurred to him, and he was readily prepared for disappointment.

"However there is some information that I can impart," Neji continued, the bitterness fading slightly from his tone, "Hopefully that will be enough to devise a tactic which you can apply to your own kekkei genkai."

There was a shuffling and Sasuke could feel Neji's gaze on him again.

"As most people are aware, the Byakuugan allows the user to see through any matter over very long distances; it possesses both x-ray vision and a degree of thermographic vision. This is accomplished

through projecting chakra in all directions and receiving the signal back through the eyes. This pulse of chakra acts as a sort of echo location, except that it can pass through solid objects; in a sense, this chakra is like a sort of 'subspace chakra' that is undetectable by any manner of ninja save for a Byakuugan user," Neji explained, both Sasuke and Sakura silent as he spoke, Sasuke personally hanging on to each word, "This is not exactly what you were hoping to accomplish, I know, and in my limited experience, Sharingan users cannot detect this particular kind of chakra, however this could be to because nobody tried to detect it. But before we see whether or not you can detect it, first we must see if you can release the pulse of chakra that will allow you to—in a sense—'see' the world. The difficult bit will be instructing you on how to precisely mold your chakra in order to accomplish this."

"You don't have to worry about that," Sakura spoke to Neji from his left, "Sasuke's mastered the ability of detecting chakra. If you use your Byakuugan, he should be able to sense how you mold your chakra and be able to mimic it. And because the Byakuugan can actually see the chakra within a person, you should be able to tell him if he's doing it correctly or not."

There was a pause from Neji—one that seemed rather surprised than anything else, "Alright then, if that is how you want to go about doing it, then let us begin."

An hour of Sasuke attempting to mimic the Byakuugan's chakra signature to obtain the effect of three-sixty vision proved fruitless in results, and after much frustration, they had given up, and were now sitting about, postulating plausible causes of him being unable to do anything in the way of copying the technique.

"Well, it was not like we did not expect this to happen," Neji told the two of them, crossing his arms, his gaze falling on Sakura, "The Sharingan and Byakuugan, after all, are not the same."

Sasuke was sitting next to her, and he was clenching his hands still in a determined seal, trying desperately to work the chakra through his body in the correct manner. Sakura gave a sigh and shook her head slightly at his determination, even if it would prove futile. The only thing she was worried about now was that Sasuke's hands would be clasped so tightly that his nails would break his skin.

"Neji," Sakura turned to the Hyuuga prodigy again, "Can you explain how you use the Byakuugan again?"

Neji gave her a surprised look, but went off into an explanation regardless, "As I said, the Byakuugan gene allows me to send out a pulse of subspace chakra from my body, which can pass through solid objects. Depending on how much energy is applied to the chakra, the ranges then vary. My doujutsu allows me to see the returning subspace chakra as it becomes weaker, bouncing off the objects at the designated distance."

Quiet for a moment, Sakura closed her eyes, thinking deeply. Sasuke's Sharingan probably couldn't read or see the subspace chakra, otherwise most Uchiha would have been able to hold their own against the Hyuuga clan. They would have been able to sense the presence of the subspace chakra, perhaps even see it, if it had come their way. She could rule out that Sasuke would be able to see the subspace chakra.

"Neji, the subspace chakra is a specialized chakra, correct?" she said after a moment, her mind trying to grasp any information that would be of use.

"Yes, why do you ask?" Neji inquired, and Sasuke's hand sign relaxed as he turned his head slightly to listen to her.

"Well, I'm just thinking if it's specialized, Sasuke won't be able to detect it," she explained lightly to the two of them.

"Are you saying that I won't be able to use the genetic similarities between Sharingan and Byakuugan to my advantage?"

Sakura shook her head firmly at Neji's expression and then added on for Sasuke's sake: "No, not at all."

"What then?" Neji asked, his crossed arms suggesting skepticism.

"I'm thinking, it's very possible for any living being that has chakra to emit a pulse of chakra from every cell in your body, Sasuke can't use subspace chakra, so why not use another kind of chakra?" she suggested, studying the both of them for a reaction.

Sasuke looked surprised and by the expression on his face, he looked like he was willing to try anything at this point. However as he opened his mouth to speak, Neji cut him off with a sharp warning.

"That could be dangerous," he said with admonition in his tone, "Pulsing off your regular chakra would drain the reserves significantly. It would almost be better to fight completely blind than drain your chakra in such a manner."

"I know," Sakura found herself replying, smiling broadly, "That's why I didn't suggest using his regular chakra—I said use *another* kind of chakra."

Sasuke frowned visibly, "What kind then?"

"Remember, Sasuke, how I told you a month ago that in order to mask your chakra, you have to use chakra itself?" she asked, speaking directly at her teammate, "Well... I'm suggesting you use the same chakra that people use to mask signatures."

There was a silence that greeted her words as the two of them thought about it. Sasuke was the first one to react to this idea.

"It will work," he said firmly, but Neji shook his head in disagreement.

"It still uses up one's chakra," he argued, sounding not entirely convinced.

"I admit, yes that it will use some chakra," Sakura spoke with consideration, "However people keep their chakra continuously masked without running out very quickly. Very little is used, and while it does drain it, it is no more than masking a signature. Or in Sasuke's case, it'll be like he's masking two signatures, nothing more."

"That is true, however the point of using that specific kind of chakra is because it is undetectable by others," Neji argued shaking his head slightly at the pink-haired kunoichi, "You are suggesting Sasuke use something that he will most likely be unable to detect himself—to try and detect it would be very difficult."

"You are right, it is difficult," Sakura replied, the smile still spread across her face, "In fact it requires above ANBU level of control in order for it to be detected...but Sasuke can sense it. Our masked signatures now...remember how I said that Sasuke would be able to detect how you used your chakra while using the Byakuugan? Well, there you have it. He can sense our signatures as we speak. Using the masking kind of chakra will be advantageous for him..."

"Because very few are able to detect it, so I should be the only who would pick it up," Sasuke finished.

"Exactly," Sakura confirmed, smiling proudly, "So unless you had some freakishly skilled opponent, nobody would be able to figure out how you are able to sense them."

Neji stood in silent contemplation for a moment and then gave a small nod, "Try it then."

There was a few minutes pause in which both Sakura and Neji were staring at Sasuke intently, waiting to see if the theory in face could be plausible. Neji's Byakuugan eyes were activated, and a serious look was fixed on his face, studying Sasuke's chakra carefully. Suddenly a sort of tingling sensation washed over Sakura, causing the hairs on the back of her neck to stand on end. The sensation was fleeing but a shiver ran down her spine as an after affect; she

knew what that was, it wasn't the masking chakra—it was normal chakra.

"I felt that," she said, the goosebumps rising slightly on her skin.

"As did I," Neji agreed, closing his eyes, "That was the wrong kind of chakra, Sasuke. Do not push yourself to show results—that could be a fatal mistake when on the battlefield. Sending a pulse of regular chakra would easily alert any enemies of your presence. Try again, but focus mostly on the masking chakra this time."

"It isn't as easy as it sounds," Sasuke told Neji evenly, but fell silent in concentration again.

The second time the pulse was irregular, and somewhat muted; studying Sasuke's frustrated expression, she assumed that he was aware that it had not worked that time either.

"A little better that time," she threw in for good measure, "I think maybe you mixed it that time or something."

Neji nodded in agreement, "Try again."

A/N: Again, I won't be updating until the last Wednesday in August. My apologies to everyone who has been hanging onto this story all summer.

Chapter 25

A/N: Alright then, like I promised, I would update today. I'm so sorry for making everyone wait this long for the chapter. The problems with RL have gotten better, and I'm just waiting to see how things with play out. In the meantime, all my Naruto projects are on the go again and I'm happy to present this chapter to everyone who waited so devotedly for it. I cannot believe that I have passed one thousand reviews. Exactly one thousand seventy as I post this chapter. I could not have done it without you, the readers, this achievement belongs to you just as much as it does to me. Thank you!

Chapter Twenty-Five: Clarity

Sasuke was standing upright, holding his hands together to form the seal of the tiger—a seal that he found the most useful in focusing his chakra—and carefully distributing the chakra equally throughout his body, he sent it out in a pulse. It had been three days since he had started training this specialized form of chakra with Neji. Sakura had said that it was best if he took up training with Neji for a bit while learning his three-sixty degree vision, seeing as Neji would have more experience in that field than she did. So while he trained with Neji, mastering the basics of this new technique, Sakura was out training with Naruto, Lee, or by herself for the upcoming mission.

Though he wouldn't admit it out loud, he missed her company; Neji was not exactly his favourite person to be around. The Hyuuga prodigy seemed to have come to peace with the fact that he was almost killed because of the Uchiha's defection from Konoha, however the man was still arrogant in his ways, and their personalities, while admittedly similar, clashed. Sakura's bright cheerful voice and chakra signature would have been nice to have around. But she understood the importance of the upcoming mission and was taking responsibility for her own training.

"Did you sense the returning pulse?" Neji asked from slightly behind, causing Sasuke to jump.

"No," he replied emotionlessly, "I was distracted."

"You cannot afford to let your mind wander, you have a deadline approaching, and I also have a mission before the end of the month, so we need to get as much accomplished in a short time," Neji reprimanded critically, "Try again."

Sasuke bit back his grumble and focused the chakra again, releasing it in an equal pulse once more. This time he was paying attention, and within a split second, the chakra returned to his alerted senses, washing over him in a strange manner. He was not unfamiliar with the feeling, having gotten used to it over the past few days, however the signals he received back were overwhelming and scrambled—though the images in his mind had been getting clearer and clearer with each attempt.

Sorting the information out in his mind again, something suddenly clicked. He sent out another successive pulse to the one he had just given, and then he used the information in that burst to clarify the image. He could almost figure out what was around him—

What if he sent out the chakra continuously? He should then receive the information back continuously and as a result be given constant information about his surroundings. It was no different than masking two chakra signatures at the same time, he deduced as he began to radiate the chakra at a constant rate. A pause, and then it began to become clearer and clearer within each second.

Around him he could 'see' that they were indeed in some sort of courtyard that surrounded them on all four sides, the walls bringing an end to his knowledge. Behind him he could 'see' Neji's form standing there like a blurred blob; in front there was a taller strange blob with some indiscernible blobs scattered near it. The ground 'looked' soft and spongy like, the lack of clarity making him unable to discern each blade of grass. In his mind each object was hazy, the

signals still scattered randomly, above him, though, he received no returning signals, there was just a gaping expanse above him. Chakra returned at different intervals, the closer objects sending it back faster than the farther one. It was hard not to get confused between the earlier signals that were from far away and the closer signals that had just been sent out.

"Did you succeed?" Neji inquired again and Sasuke nodded mutely, trying to grasp the different signals individually so as not to confuse them.

The feeling was slightly nauseating now that he had to concentrate more. In his mind the image he conjured was a soft glowing green—the same colour as the chakra he had seen medical ninja use in the past. It reminded him vaguely of Sakura for that very reason. The sky above him was black, an endless expanse, save for the occasional blot that streaked across—bird, he assumed. There was something eerie about the chakra world that bothered him though, something he could not place. The images in his head, they had no shadows, there was nothing he couldn't 'see'. Figures hiding in the shadows would not be able to tail him, he noted—this was an advantage, however the lack of shadows unnerved him. He could not place why that bothered him, so for the moment he ignored it, focusing instead on the image in his mind.

"I can't get a clear image," he muttered to himself, "I can't make anything out at all."

"It is the same for Byakuugan users when they begin their training," Neji told him passively, "It is because the body has to grow accustomed to sorting out the details that are sent to you. Over time, and with practice, even the smallest of details will not escape you, and you will be able to, in a sense, see everything."

"I can make shapes out," Sasuke said to himself more than the Hyuuga present, "The walls are obvious, but I don't know if there are windows or doors. I can sense your form standing behind me, but I cannot make out your head from your neck or your neck from you

shoulders. And—" Sasuke paused in his speech to point at the scattered shapes in front of him, "—what the hell...are those?"

"A tree with a rock and two bushes beneath it," Neji replied evenly, "You've made quick progress in a couple of days, Sasuke; most Hyuuga children cannot learn this quickly. But then again, I suppose no less should be expected of an Uchiha, a blind one or no."

Sasuke had nothing to say to this comment, instead he remained silent, now trying to focus his chakra on one particular object, to perhaps gain better detail on said object. Neji, however, seemed to have other plans.

"It is getting to be evening, and I am sure that Sakura will be expecting you home soon," Neji said in a blank way.

Cutting off the flow of chakra he gave a firm nod and said nothing in response. He never argued with the Hyuuga prodigy and left when he was told to. If it had been Sakura overseeing his training, he probably would have insisted on a little longer, but he did nothing of the sort now. He walked the distance to the veranda, being extra cautious, the location still being somewhat unfamiliar to him, and stepped up on the edge.

"I will have someone walk you home," Neji told him politely, stepping up next to him, "If you have time, continue to practice manipulating your chakra, and try and use your three-sixty vision as often as you can. I will see you tomorrow morning."

Time flew quickly over the month of September as the progress Sasuke made seemed slow to him in relation to the pace he would have liked to have been making. The mission seemed to be drawing nearer and nearer at a rapid pace and he felt like he was standing still. It had only been a week and a half—mid through the second week in September—since he had begun to work on his skill, and while the images in his head had increased in detail significantly (the

trees now had visible branches and clear canopy blobs), he still found himself practicing as often as he could.

It was one of those rare days that he and Sakura were both home at the same time, and awake. Normally when Sakura came home it was later in the evening and he had already gone to bed. Though she never knew it, Sasuke would lie awake in bed until her presence came within his now very large range of chakra signature detection. After sensing to make sure that the signature was still flickering with the same cheer, instead of the intermittent spark of injury or the low glow of near-fainting, he would allow himself to fall asleep, knowing she would soon be home and there for him by morning.

Today was different however—Sakura had come home early on Lee's insistence, and Sasuke hadn't arrived much later than them. He had listened with amusement as Sakura complained during dinner in a Naruto-like fashion about how she wanted to continue training, but Lee had told her she was over-working herself. The rant itself had been amusing, but Sasuke inwardly found himself agreeing with Maito Gai's favourite student. Whenever he had sensed Sakura's signature, he had noted that it seemed utterly exhausted, and worry was beginning to afflict him. However he trusted that Sakura knew her limits, for it would be hypocritical of her to go preaching about his determination to keep working even though he was tired.

Even though the two of them were home early, neither of them had passed up the chance to continue training. Sasuke was sitting on the edge of his own veranda, Sakura doing some stretches on the lawn.

"How have things been going with Neji?" she asked conversationally, disrupting his concentration as she spoke.

"Fine," he replied simply, the comment sounding neither rude nor warm.

"Are you able to sense things fairly well or...?" she asked, unfamiliar with how she should call his training.

"Things are generally clear, but things are out of focus. Directing my chakra at a particular object or place makes it easier to see them, but focusing it all around me is a little more difficult" he commented, and he knew she was probably stunned by the verb that had been dubbed for the chakra sensing, so he added: "'Seeing' is the most practical way to describe what happens when I sense with my chakra."

"Oh, okay," she said awkwardly, and he smirked slightly in amusement, "I just thought I'd ask because I haven't hardly seen you at all in the past week."

"Hn," he replied in agreement with her statement.

"You know, I've missed you," she said afterwards, her voice sounding contemplative, serene, "We've been spending so much time together that now, to me, it's strange to be without you for so long."

He gave a small smirk to himself; he knew what she meant. He didn't know why he actually missed her, perhaps it was because she was the only ward against isolation and loneliness that he knew of, and to have that absent, missing...

"I mean, I'm sure that you've enjoyed the space that you've been given, and all," she continued with an air of uncertainty, seeming to take his silence negatively, "But I just feel that—"

"It's fine," he cut her off.

"What is?" she asked, her voice confused.

"Your presence, I don't mind it when you're around," he told her offhandedly.

Reflecting on how Sakura had grown as a person, she wasn't irritating anymore. Before as a child, she had been clingy, loud, and almost useless to the group. He had noticed that after the Chuunin

Exam she had become less so and was doing her best to help the team. And now, being around her when she was a young woman, he could tolerate her, grown a little attached to her even.

"Really?" she seemed genuinely surprised.

A small frown descended onto his brow; did he really give that impression? That she wasn't wanted?

"Annoying people grow on me, I suppose," he said with a light smirk on his face, and he knew that she was smiling at him. If he redirected the projection of all his chakra, he could barely make out the traces of that smile, almost.

"Well, I'm glad," was all that she said in response.

There was a spell of silence between them, and Sasuke took up the act of trying to focus his chakra all around him again. He could sense the wall to his left, the supporting pillar in front of him as he sat facing between the wall and the garden. He could see Sakura moving, the rough outline of her stretching positions apparent. However he could not see things in detail. There were slight depressions in the wall for windows and doors, but beyond that there was no indication. He could see where the grass ended and the flowerbeds began, but he could not see clearly the blades of grass or the earth of the bed. Neji had assured him that with practice he would be able to detect each one as if he were actually seeing it. So far, no such luck.

He let out a small growl, in frustration and dropped his hands from the seal, leaning his head back on the pole his back was against. He lay in contemplation for a while. He had been on edge all week, the smallest things annoying him, and the most obvious things missing his attention. He was having difficulty focusing on anything at the moment, and what annoyed him is that he knew the reason why. He was tired of hanging around with Neji, the cold, direct orders and responses getting on his nerves after so much exposure to his personality.

He really did miss Sakura's company, her encouraging words, her gentle laugh, and he missed it when she sang softly to herself while she worked. Having spent so much time with his friend for the past five months and a half, he shared in her sentiments when she had said it was strange to be away from one another.

The wind blew gently around him, and leaves shook loose from the trees, falling across his senses. He could almost see them, the outlines of their jagged edges, the veins—he knew they were there, but he still he could not pick up on the subtle details. One landed on the porch a little ways in front of him, and quickly became hidden with the floor. The fact that he could not distinguish the difference between a simple leaf and a plank irritated him.

Diverting his chakra so he was focusing it only forward onto the wood, he could separate the floor from the leaf, and make out a slightly rough edge on the leaf. He scowled; this was going nowhere it seemed. Hyuuga Neji had suggested that maybe if he used his already trained senses to help him get a better picture of what he was focusing on, he may be able to gain an advantage.

He moved slightly to make a grab for the leaf when another small puff of wind took the leaf to the air again, blowing it farther from his reach. So much for that, he grumbled in resignation, instead following the blob of a leaf with his senses until it landed near Sakura, where he lost it in the grass' signals. Sakura's foot came down where he had last sensed the leaf, entering the area of his concentration. Something occurred to him at that moment.

"Sakura," he called out to her, completely abandoning the pulses of chakra, allowing himself to lapse into an empty void.

He heard a pause from her, "Yes?"

"Come here," he made a small impatient waving motion with his hands, beckoning her over.

The grass rustled quietly under her footfalls, and when she spoke again, her voice was about a meter from him. "What is it, Sasuke?"

"Sit down," he indicated to a spot next to him, moving so his legs were hanging over the edge of the veranda. She complied without a word, and he sent out a small pulse of chakra in order to determine where she was exactly. Slowly he reached out towards her face, resting his hands gently on her cheeks.

"...Sasuke?" she asked uncertainly, her breath sounding caught in her throat. He couldn't help but be slightly amused by her reaction.

"I can't see you; I want to know what you look like," he told her evenly. He hadn't seen her for years, and he realized that he still didn't know what she looked like now.

He ran his fingers slowly over her face, tracing her features gently, letting his touch paint a picture in his mind. The constant flow of chakra clarified the image and as his hands moved, he could see her face clearly in front of him. Slender eyebrows, softened cheekbones, a curving jaw line—a portrait of a pink-haired woman, rather than a pink-haired girl, appearing in his head. She had matured and grown from what he remembered. His fingers passed over her lips, then tucked behind her ears, and finally tracing down her neck where they came to rest at the nape, the ends of her petal-hued tresses brushing gently against the back of his hands.

"You kept it short," he stated in a factual manner, his voice somewhat quiet. He had thought she had kept her hair short, though he had never been certain.

Sakura had sat through the procedure quietly, seeming too surprised to say anything. It was a moment before she found the voice to reply. "Yeah," she murmured shyly, "It's easier to manage."

"It's better short," was all he chose to say in response. It was more practical in his opinion.

"D-do you really think so?" she stammered in a somewhat nervous manner.

A shrug rolled off his shoulders in response, and after a pause, he brought his hands away from her neck and rested them back on her cheeks. An amused smirk came to him as he felt the warmth of her face.

"You're blushing," he accused her lightly.

"A-am I?" she stuttered, the warmth of her face increasing a little more. She laid her hands on top of his in a somewhat self-conscious manner, but did not remove them from her cheeks.

"Your face is getting warmer," he commented bemusedly.

She clasped the back of his hands and looked at him intently through the tears that were building up in her eyes. Sasuke probably didn't realize it, but his eyes were aligned perfectly with hers, his dark obsidian irises matching hers equally. She was staring deep into those eyes, eyes that were gazing steadily back—eyes whose gaze passed through her viridian eyes and beyond her. He was not able to see her, she knew, but she felt that the gaze was both there and not—nonexistent yet deep enough to penetrate her soul. And as she looked into those sightless eyes, a sorrow welled up within her, the tears sitting dangerously on the edge of her eyelashes, threatening to fall.

"Your face is getting warmer," he told her, an amused smirk playing on his lips.

In response, she closed her eyes and leaned forwards so that her forehead was touching his; she could sense his uncertainty at the gesture, but Sasuke made no move to put distance between them. It was then that she swore to herself that she would do everything—everything she could... She would restore Sasuke's sight, even if it killed her.

Cracking open one of the medical textbooks that she had borrowed from the library, Sakura scanned the pages thoroughly. There had to be something she had she could do, and in order to discover what she was required to do, she needed to find out what was wrong. After the silent oath to herself yesterday evening, she had made a point of borrowing every book from the library that could have anything to do with the human eye and promptly hauled them back to the manor.

It was evening now and Sasuke was taking a shower at the moment, allowing her to set some time aside to pull out the books and arrange the embossed spines towards the wall. She knew his senses were probably only a little better from yesterday, but she did not want him to see the spines of the books. She knew that attempting to restore his vision with a three point something-or-other percent chance, was really a slim possibility, even if she did extensive research; she did not want to get Sasuke's hopes up.

Now, she told herself decisively, what could be the thing that was preventing the return of vision? Obviously the light wasn't obstructed from his eyes; she had made sure there was no residual damage after healing them, so there must be something preventing the impulses from his eye to his occipital lobe. There could be retinal damage that she was unaware of, there could be sensory damage of the optic nerve to his brain, or there could be damage to the occipital lobe as well.

"What are you doing?"

Sakura jumped slightly as Sasuke addressed her and she looked up at him. He wasn't facing her, but she knew that he was probably analyzing her with his senses. Being so immersed in her studies, she had been startled when he spoke, not even noticing that he had come out of the bathroom.

"I'm just brushing up on my knowledge," she told him lightly, feeling bad for lying to him, "The mission is ten days away and I want to

make sure I'm up to date with my medical knowledge. This *is* a B-Ranked mission, which means there is the potential threat of danger. If anyone was to get injured, I have to be able to assist them."

He gave a nod of understanding and walked over to the bed, crawling underneath the covers on his bed and putting his arms behind his head, facing the ceiling. It wasn't until he spoke that she realized that something was bothering him.

"Sakura?"

"What is it, Sasuke?" she asked him absently, currently distracted by the info bit on the suspensory ligaments.

"I want to...get some renovators to remove Itachi's room from the house," he said after a moment, sounding unsure of his words, "I don't want it there anymore."

Sakura stopped reading and looked at Sasuke with an expression marked with surprise, "You do? I mean, you don't? Ack, you *do* want renovators, and you *don't* want the room around anymore?"

He gave a firm nod, "It's bothering me."

"Bothering you how?" she asked; as far as she knew, he hadn't been anywhere near the room. In fact he seemed to be avoiding it like the plague.

"It's like...a hole in this house," he said finally, the words sounding awkward like he didn't know how to explain it to her, "It's like a void where everything is being pulled towards it, drawing everything in and letting nothing out. I know it sounds strange but... I just want it gone."

"I'll look into it tomorrow," she told him firmly. This was the first time he had ever discussed the room since she had demanded him to make her understand, to talk to her about things like this. It seemed that finally he was making an attempt at explaining to her, and that

was enough for her, she was glad that he was at least trying to open up a little to her.

He gave a small nod and then rolled over onto his side, facing away from her. Returning to her reading she gave a shiver at the thought of Itachi's room. She could understand why it bothered him, because she too was now feeling the affect of it. It would be removed as soon as they returned home from their mission, she decided; she doubted that there would be any renovators that could come on such short notice.

Turning her attention back to her book, she allowed a small smile to grace her lips. If Sasuke was willing to be rid of Itachi's room, then changes were possible, and maybe, perhaps maybe he was beginning to let go of the past.

Another long day of training had come and gone for Sasuke, and the mission was creeping closer and closer, now there was a week left before the mission was to commence, and Sasuke felt secretly excited. He had tried to brush the feeling off, telling himself that it was only a mission and he shouldn't get worked up over it like a child would, but despite that, he still found himself anticipating the mission. Excitement, it wasn't a feeling he had felt in a while; he hadn't had anything to look forward to in years, it was a little nostalgic.

He gave a small grin to himself as he walked towards the back door; only seven more days and then he would be able to get out of the village for a while. Konoha was all well and good, and he was glad that he had stayed, but he felt a little restless, wanderlust seeping into him. It would be nice to get out to travel. Naruto was probably beside himself with excitement over the fact that they were getting together as a team again, and this was their first mission in a while. He wondered if Sakura was excited as well—probably not as much.

On the topic of Sakura, he had requested that they do some training together, using the excuse of becoming accustomed to how they

fight normally in an all out fight. He actually wanted to have a reason to be near her again, and away from Neji's persona for a bit.

He reflected on the two training sessions he had been through with her; the tables had turned now that he could somewhat see what was going on around him, and his vision had gotten sharper the more he practiced it. Details were almost crystal clear to him save for the extremely minor things, and he could tell what Sakura was doing, no matter where she was standing. Whether she was in front or behind, or above, he could see her. And even if she was underground, he could sense her chakra signature, picking up on it easily. Before he could sense where she was coming from, now he could see the attacks she was to deliver, and while he missed the advantage of using the Sharingan to pick up on the subtle movements and the movement of chakra as it was subconsciously molded, allowing him to be able to tell what was happening before hand, being able to see things a little later was better than not being able to see them at all.

Ever since he started training with Sakura again, she had only won once out of multiple sessions.

One thing concerned him though, he noted with a frown as he kicked off his shoes at the back door: Sakura was working herself harder than she had been any time previously those past five months. At first he thought it was just because she wished to get back into shape for the mission, but the sudden lack of suggested breaks, and the determination to train later instead of heading home had now grabbed his attention. It wouldn't have concerned him so much if it hadn't been to such an extreme degree, and he found himself wondering if Naruto and Maito Gai's pet student, Lee, were both letting her get away with this. She was clearly overworking herself.

Additionally, if Sakura hadn't been getting enough sleep before, it was even worse now. For the past couple days she had been staying up so much later than usual, reading. His nightmares were already hindering her sleeping patterns, and now she was getting even less sleep from reading her books. He had no idea what she was

researching, but she was so absorbed by the information she barely responded when spoken to—rare behaviour for Sakura to show, as he was used to her listening carefully to every word he spoke.

It was just as he was walking down the hall towards where Sakura's signature sat in the kitchen that he felt her get up and come swiftly in his general direction. When she appeared at the end of the hall she made a beeline for him and promptly seized his hand; raising an eyebrow at her, he allowed her to tow him deeper inside the house.

"Sit down on the couch," she told him as they entered the living room, "I want to examine you for a minute."

"Examine me?" he echoed, sitting down on the couch next to her as she gave his hand an insistent tug.

"Yes," she replied, not saying anything to elaborate—Sasuke was unsure of whether it was deliberate or not, "Don't try and detect anything using your chakra, I don't want it to interfere with mine."

He gave a nod, cutting off the constant pulse of chakra he had been emitting, sitting perfectly still.

"Turn your head away from me," she instructed, and he complied, feeling utterly and completely bewildered.

He sensed Sakura focus her chakra in her hands, molding it in a way that he had come to associate with medical ninjutsu. Two sets of fingertips were placed on the back of his scalp and she sent the chakra into the back of his head; at first it was fine, tingling oddly as it passed through his scalp, but then a couple of images flashed across his mind. They were too fast to tell what they were; whatever Sakura was doing at the moment was obviously affecting his mind. He remembered all the genjutsus she had put on him and how they forced the illusion of sight upon him—her explanation on the back of the mind being associated with vision vaguely came to him. The chakra was beginning to affect him, he realized as his thoughts

became clouded. A similar sensation had happened when he was still in hospital back in May.

"Okay," Sakura said after a moment, retracting the chakra from his system, causing his mind to both long the sensation to return and to clear again, "That's fine then. Turn towards me."

Still confused, he did as he was asked, and was soon met with a similar procedure to the one before, however this time the procedure was longer, allowing the chakra being able to grasp him more readily. The longer she worked the chakra through his skin, the more his mind began to drift. The session soon came to a halt and allowed it to snap back to clarity again—the duration of her examination wasn't nearly as long as they had been in hospital, therefore his mind wasn't able to run too far away on him.

"Alright, thank you, Sasuke," she told him getting up, "That provided all the information that I needed."

"Are you going to tell me what you were doing?" he asked here, frowning slightly at the fact that she hadn't revealed it yet.

"I will, but not right now," she said to him, turning to leave.

"Where are you going?" he asked her as she was departing.

"I'm going to go read," she told him happily before her presence had wandered out of conversation range.

He sat there on the couch for a moment longer, shaking the last of the lightheaded thoughts from his mind. What was going on?

It wasn't until much later when Sasuke entered the bedroom that evening that any light was shed on the situation. When he entered the room he found Sakura sitting cross-legged on his bed, a large textbook in her lap. He had stopped where he was and determinedly turned his face towards her, putting on an expression that clearly

demanded an explanation. There was the reading, the training until she was exhausted, the examination today, and he wanted to know what was going on.

"Come here," she said, indicating that he should sit down next to her, completely ignoring the look he had determinedly fixed her with.

Resigningly he walked over to the bed and sat down next to her. "Are you going to explain to me now?" he asked her, sitting crossed legged.

She smiled and put the textbook aside, "In a minute. Sit facing the wall on your left."

He did so, and when he was in place, with his senses he saw her reach out towards him as she had done earlier that day. She gently pulled on his shoulders, encouraging him to lie down backwards, and as he did so, his head landed neatly in her lap. She placed her fingers on his temples, and he realized what she was doing. She had done this before, when he was in hospital, when she had been healing his eyes; why she was doing this again, he did not know.

"You noticed that I've been reading a lot lately," she told him, her voice sounding somewhat professional, "Well, I told you that I was just updating my medical knowledge, but actually, I've been reading up on the human eye."

The book was lying next to him, and he could sense from where he was that the embossed title read clearly: *Principles and Studies of Illness and Injury to the Human Eye*. He had a feeling that he knew where she was going with this, but he scarcely dared to hope in case it was completely different.

"It just doesn't make much sense to me why you can't see," she told him, sounding perplexed by the notion, "Of course there was damage to your eyes, but I never saw the test results which gave the figure of a four percent chance of your vision returning. I went and looked that up today when you were training with Neji, and I think I

have an idea behind the nature of your blindness. I never looked into it earlier because I hadn't really thought about why your sight couldn't return, I just knew it wouldn't."

"So what you're saying is..." he trailed off uncertainly.

"I might be able to get your sight back," Sakura told him with a smile, "I don't want to brag, but I remember clearly—the day before you were brought to hospital, Tsuande-sama told me that I had a unique way of using my chakra, a way that she hadn't thought to use. She told me it was effective, perhaps even more so. I feel that there must be something I can do for you that maybe nobody else can... And with your permission Sasuke, I'd like to try."

He was quiet for a moment, before giving a small nod. Even though he had adapted to the world he now lived in, he would give anything to have his sight back. The world that his senses gave to him, the world of chakra, it was all well and good, and even though he could see behind him now, it still appeared to him in his mind as the pale green, colourless world. Even though he was used to it somewhat by now, he wasn't used to the blackness above that was the sky, nor the lack of shadows. He wanted to see the blues of the sky, the greens of the trees and the grasses, even just to see the pink shade of Sakura's hair.

"Like in the hospital, I'll tell you again: there won't be changes over night; this could take a very long time, and even then, it still might not work," she told him, her voice serious, almost grave, "But I promise you this Sasuke, I will persevere until I find another way, or your sight does come back. Either way, I swear to help you."

His lip twitched in amusement at her speech; she was so determined to help him that she would go to such lengths. He shook his head slightly.

"Do only what you can," he told her, and she gave a small nod.

The gentle flow of her chakra came to him as she began to try and fix his eyes. He closed his eyes and shut down the chakra senses, only allowing himself to feel the gentle flow of her chakra and the smallest ounce of hope.

A/N: Whew, another chapter done. Mission starts on chapter twenty-seven. I thought you should know. People have requested that I restore Sasuke's sight in the reviews, but before any of you jump to any conclusions, you still don't know if this will work. I don't get swayed by majority vote--for all you know, Sakura's attempt could be me just pulling your leg. ;)

Please review!

Chapter 26

A/N: Gah, sure, the Friday before I post this chapter, that is when Kishimoto decides to give Flower-chan a name. Gah, well, I'll incorporate it into the story sooner rather than later (I hope) but until then, bear with the nickname. I need an appropriate time for her to reveal her name.

Edit 11/07: Though Itachi doesn't use the nickname Flower-chan, when the story is told from Nariko's perspective that becomes her name. The only time 'Konan' is used for Konan's name is when viewed from Itachi, Konan, or Pein's point of view. Though as of yet we haven't been in Konan's or Pein's perspective.

Chapter Twenty-six: Traces of Self-Sacrifice

The rain was falling steadily outside, and Nariko was standing on her tiptoes staring outside the window of Flower-chan's room. There were no windows around Itachi's quarters and now that she was in Flower-chan's room, she could peer out the hold carved in the stone and gaze out over the scenery. She had forgotten such wonders that she had only seen early on in her life: the mountains, the rain, the sky, the stars at night or the sun on the meadows. It was only now that she had been rescued by Itachi that she could view these glorious wonders. She stretched her arm out the window and let the rain fall on the skin of her arm, amazement gracing her face as the drops accumulated on her palms.

Withdrawing her hand for a moment she peered down below. It was a long ways down, she noted—Akatsuki lived in this large mountain, and Flower-chan's room was higher up on the cliff face than some of the other rooms. It was a sheer drop down for many stories, and then there were sharp rocks at the bottom; it would hurt if she fell, she thought to herself. Beyond the bottom of the cliff was a small

grove of trees—trees had looked so beautiful to Nariko when she had first woken up on her way from her village to this mountain. She remembered seeing them when she was a little girl, the leaves falling off in the winter and growing back in the spring, but she had been shut away and years had passed before she saw them again.

A hand went unconsciously to her stomach, laying it there for a moment in silent contemplation. When they had locked her up, she thought that she had done something terribly wrong, something that had made everyone angry with her, and they were punishing her. Whatever it had been, it was bad enough for her to stay down in that dark hole for many years. But no, they had shut her away because of the demon in her body, the demon Itachi had told her about. She wondered when the demon had come, she could not remember any significant time in which it could have possibly possessed her body. But what she did remember was a time when it had made itself apparent—and now she realized that it had been the demon, where before it had been left unknown.

She had been very small back then, and it was...rainy, just like it was that day, save for the clouds were darker, blacker. It was an old memory, one that had faded a little with time. Details were somewhat muted, and she found herself unable to recall what had exactly happened. There was an older boy, along with a few others—they had been laughing at her, shouting at her. She closed her eyes for a minute; she remembered crying, she remembered being afraid.

Chaos followed those memories, snatches of scenes floating across her mind. There had been a deafening crack, a flash of bluish-yellow light, searing heat and energy that had made her hair stand on end. After the smoke from the phenomenon had cleared, the boys were gone, and there had been a large dip in the ground, like someone had taken a spoon and scooped a portion of it out.

People had come then, rushing to the noise; there was more yelling, and she shed more tears. There were multiple flashes and each time they occurred, more and more people disappeared. What happened after that, she was unsure—unconsciousness perhaps? Whatever

had occurred, she had been locked away for good, separated from her parents—which she no longer could remember the faces of—and hardly fed.

When had the first of the dreams come? Whenever it had been, it was after the day where the flashes had riddled the earth around her, leaving all but her unscathed. She dreamed of a wicked-looking creature with a long body and pointed teeth; the fur of the creature was the same colour as her hair, the eyes red like Itachi's...and it had six tails. The bright flashes—which Itachi had told her were lightning—played in her dreams, the wicked animal wielding it and destroying everything around her. She would always wake up frightened.

And then Itachi came—he took her away from that place where people hated her. The demon, he said, was what caused them to hate her. If it was gone, they would like her, and if she gave it to him when she was better, then she could go home. She should have realized it before—they hated the demon; that was what had killed those boys and the villagers. Once she was rid of it, she could tell the villagers what happened, and they would understand, they would accept her back. She had to get stronger again, for Itachi and for herself.

Smiling contentedly she took her hand off her stomach and stuck it out the window again, letting the drops splash on her once more. It was so nice to feel the rain, and she wondered how it was possible for water to fall from the sky. Leaning out a bit further she tried to let more of her skin get touched by the rain. It was so hypnotic and refreshing, she did not pay any attention when the door opened behind her. It was most likely Flower-chan, who she didn't really like.

"Nariko!" Flower-chan yelled suddenly, and then she felt herself being pulled back by the collar of the Akatsuki robe she was wearing. With frightened eyes she looked up at blue-haired woman, who was staring down at her with fright, "Don't ever lean that far out of the window! You could have fallen."

Nariko looked down at the ground, "I wasn't going to fall."

An impatient sigh, "Well, accidents happen, Kit."

Kit was what Flower-chan called her when not using her real name, and at first Nariko had found it confusing. She did not know one could have more than one name. Later she had asked Itachi about it, and he explained that Flower-chan had affectionate nicknames for all the personnel in the mountain. When she had asked what a 'kit' was, he explained that it was a term used to describe the offspring of a number of small carnivorous creatures, such as foxes, ferrets, and weasels. Why she had been called 'Kit' was beyond Nariko, but she just accepted things as they were, not asking questions.

"I'll be careful," she reassured Flower-chan before scrambling to her feet.

A sigh came from the older woman and she shook her head slightly from side to side before going over and sitting at a desk that was set up in the corner, spreading out a number of scrolls and papers. Sitting down, she ignored Nariko, becoming mesmerized in the many pretty symbols that were marked across those sheets. Turning back to the window and looking out over the landscape, Nariko instead was content to merely watch the rain fall, rather than let it touch her skin. While she did not like Flower-chan much, she knew she would not be pleased if she leaned out the window again, and she didn't want to be jerked backwards another time.

The landscape was rocky and many mountains were laid out before her, the trees growing tall and pointy. They were odd trees whose leaves were pointed and sharp, and a dark green instead of the lighter colours she was used to. Beyond the trees there was a small dip in the ground where a large lake lay, the beautiful blue colours would catch the sunlight on a clear day, but now it was a smoky gray. This land was so beautiful; Itachi had told her that this place was called the Land of Earth, and that Deidara had once come from a village in this land. Itachi had also told her that there were many other places where the Akatsuki dwelt, this being one of them. She

wondered where else Itachi had lived, and if it was as beautiful as here.

Was it a nice place, his home? Did he have a family who loved him? A mother or father? She wondered if his parents missed him, just like she wondered if hers missed her. She had never had any siblings that she was aware of, and she wondered if Itachi might have had some. Would they be older or younger? And did they admire him as much as she did? She would have to ask him.

"Flower-chan? When is Itachi-sama coming back?" she asked, not turning her gaze away from the scene before her, "He's been gone forever."

"A month is not forever, Kit," Flower-chan replied absently, "He'll be back before you know it."

"How long until he's back?" she asked again, finally tearing her gaze away from the rain.

"I'm guessing about another month and a half," she replied, finally looking up from her work long enough to fix Nariko with a perceptive gaze, "It's a long ways to where he's going."

"How do you know?" she found herself asking despairingly, "Maybe it's not as far as you think...?"

"Oh, I know, Kit—I used to live where he's going," she said turning back to work, "We're located deep within the Land of Earth, and it'd take him a week and a bit to reach the border—"

"How long is a week?" Nariko cut in, her mind unfamiliar with the length of times for weeks and months—years was a new concept to her too.

"Seven days—it would have taken Itachi ten days to reach the border, and another seven to reach the Land of Rain to deliver a message; from there it will take another twenty to reach the borders

of my land," Flower-chan elaborated, fixing Nariko with a firm stare, "Are you staying with me? That's thirty seven days—he's been gone thirty. It will take him another five days to get to where he needs to be. After that he will be returning here by sea, which will take two days to cross between the Land of Lightning and the peninsula. Three days across the peninsula, another four days at sea to port and another four to reach our location. The total trip time will be fifty-five days."

"And he's been gone thirty," Nariko said uncertainly, not very good at counting, "So he'll be back in..."

"Twenty-five days, give or take a few," she said offhandedly, turning back to her work, "Just wait, and he'll be back."

Nariko sighed and walked away from the window, seating herself in a corner of the room; she watched Flower-chan tentatively, studying her movements. The woman was hard at work, drawing the little characters that Itachi said he would teach her to 'read'. How many people could read? Nariko wondered to herself. Curiously, she got to her feet and cautiously approached the table, sitting down opposite Flower-chan, being quiet as not to disturb her.

"Are you reading?" she asked after a moment.

"Yes, but if there's something you need, I can get it for you now," Flower-chan stated, looking up at her.

Nariko shook her head, "No, I was just wondering if that was what you were doing. ...I can't read, but Itachi-sama said he would teach me."

"Did he now?" Flower-chan fixed her with a piercing look and Nariko looked down at the ground; she didn't like it when she drew on the attention of the other members. A moment of silence passed before Flower-chan turned back to her work and muttered: "That's out of character."

Nariko didn't know what she meant by that, but she had a feeling that Flower-chan was surprised by Itachi's offer, "Do you know Itachi-sama...well?"

A thoughtful pause. "I suppose I do know him, but not too well," she replied amusedly, "I don't talk to him much."

"But I see you talking to him all the time," Nariko found herself saying, looking at Flower-chan incredulously. When Flower-chan met her gaze, she looked away nervously, feeling like she had spoken out of place, "I mean, well... There's something different when you talk to him... I just thought that because of that maybe you knew him better... It's just the way you look at him when you talk...it's different."

Flower-chan looked down at her work again, taking the sheet of paper with the symbols on it, she folded it up into a small bird, "No differently than I look at Deidara or any other man for that matter, Kit."

"It is though," Nariko found herself saying in reply, not looking at the blue-haired woman sitting across from her, "...Do you...care about him, Flower-chan?"

"No more than I care for Deidara, our leader, or any other man for that matter," there was a sharp edge in her voice that Nariko didn't like; Flower-chan grabbed a brush and began inking more symbols on a page, "You have lived most of your life away from other people, as I understand it, so I do not expect you to understand the relationship between me and Uchiha Itachi. But I would advise you to stay clear of things that you cannot comprehend."

Nariko stood and gave a small bow, "I'm sorry."

"Now, I have work to do, so go entertain yourself elsewhere until I am finished," Flower-chan instructed waving her off, a drop of ink flying off the end of the brush and landing on a perfectly white page,

"And know that this conversation is not to leave the walls of this room."

Nodding mutely Nariko scuttled out of the room before she brought any more of Flower-chan's displeasure upon her. After the door had closed behind her, Konan let out a long sigh and folded her hands together, resting her chin on her knuckles. Her eyes fell on the blot of ink on the clean page before her; her eyes flicked from the dot to door in which Nariko had departed. The white page was no longer pure.

The days to the mission were limited now to one. And as the evening of the final day was drawing to a close, Sakura was doing her best to beat Sasuke to a pulp, and failing miserably. In fact, the sparing session was going rather badly on her part, and she was already getting the feeling that she was going to lose. Sasuke was coming in from behind now, and she knew that no matter what she tried, she would not be able to delay the inevitable.

Whirling about, she did the most she could do, focusing the chakra in her arms she put up her arms to block the attack which would undoubtedly send her flying backwards. As she held up her arms in front of her face, she squinted her eyes shut and braced for the pain of the blow, but it never came. As soon as she realized that the blow was not to be imparted upon her, she opened her eyes immediately—if he was not attacking, then he must be trying to get her from another angle, hit her in a vulnerable spot. It was much to her surprise when she opened her eyes and saw Sasuke merely standing in front of her his fist six inches from her braced arms.

She peered up at him suspiciously and did not lower her arms; what was he playing at? More surprise plagued her as Sasuke lowered his fist down and merely stood rooted to the spot.

"We should stop for the day," he said evenly to her, and she frowned slightly.

"Why did you stop the fight?" she asked him, finally lowering her arms from in front of her, "I don't see why we should stop training for today...it's still early."

"The mission is tomorrow, Sakura," he told her stoically, "You've been overworking yourself lately, and I don't want you too tired for tomorrow."

"I have not been over-working myself," she told him with indignance, "Why didn't you finish the fight? Are you still afraid you'll hurt me, Sasuke? Why do you keep underestimating me?"

"I don't," he told her flatly, "I don't want you to have to waste extra chakra on healing your bruises. Now come, let's go home and head in early."

She shook her head defiantly at him, "You can go if you want, but I am going to stay here and train a little longer, even if it means having to train on my own."

"Sakura," he too was frowning.

"What on earth makes you think that I've been overworking myself?" she demanded, her irritation fading slightly into anger.

"You've been getting up in the middle of the night to quell my nightmares, you've been expending your energy on training as late as you possibly can, and you've spent a lot of your chakra trying to restore my vision," he replied with irritation that reflected her own, his arms crossed across his chest "You're exhausted, and you need to be refreshed by tomorrow. And you will not be staying here to train, not if I can help it."

"I'm sorry Sasuke, but you don't dictate what I do," she told him stubbornly, "I am not going to waste my time sleeping when I could be getting stronger by training."

He gave a slight tilt of the head that suggested the phrase: 'if that's how you are going to be', and dropped his arms to his sides. She was about to turn away when he suddenly swept her off her feet, throwing her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

"What the... *hell* , Sasuke!?" she exclaimed angrily at him as he started to walk down the path that led to Konoha's main gates, "Put me down, Sasuke! Put me down!"

"No," he replied, but his voice suggested that he was amused by her actions.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?!" she exclaimed at him.

"Taking you back to the village," he replied emotionlessly, and she let out a frustrated groan.

If only he hadn't done that chakra training with Neji! He could see perfectly in all directions, with no blind spots to speak of. He could pick out each detail, no matter how near or far it was, and she knew he would not stumble on the path while he carried her. Before he could 'see' in this manner, he had to be guided most of the time to the training grounds, which had been convenient for Sakura, because she got to decide when to leave. Now it was out of her hands and she currently was not in control.

"Dammit, Sasuke, put me down!" she shouted, trying to wriggle free, but his grasp on her merely tightened, "I have to improve, I'm not going to be labeled as weak!"

"Nobody's calling you weak," he told her rationally, still walking and she watched in dismay as the grounds were getting farther away one step at a time.

"My father is!" she exclaimed back to him, "I don't care if nobody else thinks so, he's the one I have to prove it to! My whole life he never believed that I would amount to anything, and he has always been the one to criticize me the hardest! I don't care if I'm not weak in

anyone else's eyes, I just care about what he thinks. I have a strong mind—I'm smart—but to him it's not worth anything if I'm not strong physically."

"I'm not telling you that you should stop forever, Sakura," he told her with a tone of annoyance, "Just for today. You're always telling me that I shouldn't push myself too hard—neither should you."

"No! I will prove it to him! I will become a jounin, and become ANBU if I must!" she shouted back, desperation washing over her, "Hell, I'll beat Naruto at becoming Hokage if I need to, but I will prove it to him! Now put me down!"

"I'll put you down when we get back home," he told her, equally as stubborn as her.

"Fine!" she shouted angrily. Flailing wasn't working, hitting him only amused him, so in a last valiant attempt she focused her chakra into her elbow, and smacked him hard across the back of the head. Sasuke's body instantly went limp as he was caught in the genjutsu, and Sakura let out a small shout of surprise as they both went tumbling to the ground.

Sasuke immediately had Sakura disappear from his arms as a black void appeared before him. He looked around wildly, the strange pulsations all around him and the knee-deep mud coating his legs. He glanced down at his hands and then up at the 'sky'; he crossed his arms.

"Well, that was royally unfair," he announced above him, and much to his relief there was a mischievous laugh in return.

"Sorry, Sasuke, but I just want to train a little bit longer," was the reply that came from all around him, "I *did* tell you to put me down. Just look on the bright side, you can practice getting out of genjutsu while you wait."

"Sakura?" he called the emptiness, but there was no reply. He scowled and put his hands together in a seal. There seemed to be no other way to stop her, "Kai!"

Sakura knelt down next to Sasuke's unconscious body for a moment, brushing his hair from his face, a small smile on her face. She had dragged him over to a tree and he was now lying in the shade of it, as the rays of the afternoon sun slowly faded to evening. Never would she have expected it of Sasuke to suggest that they stop training of all things. His words to her were sincere it seemed, and she felt a small self-conscious blush creeping up on her cheeks.

"Sorry, Sasuke," she told his unconscious body, looking at his serene expression, "But for what it's worth, your concern is touching."

And with those final words, she rose to her feet and walked off towards the training grounds.

It took an hour to break out of that genjutsu—a new record for him, but despite that, Sasuke was not pleased. Even as he had walked home with Sakura's arm linked with his, he was not happy; she had been happy enough to leave as soon as he had gotten out of it, but he still was angry with himself for letting her be able to pull a stunt off like that. And now as he proceeded to the bedroom to go to bed early for the night, he felt frustrated.

As he drew near to the room, he let out a weary groan; he didn't need to see in order to sense that Sakura was sitting on his bed, waiting for him. She only sat on his bed when she was going to go through another healing procedure with him, trying to restore his vision back to normal. As he entered the room he turned his head towards her and fixed a firm expression upon her face.

"Not tonight, Sakura, you need your rest," he told her, but then a pleading expression crossed her face.

"I know it seems like it's not doing anything, Sasuke," she said with a begging tone in her voice, "But it's making a difference, I can just sense it."

So far she had gone through six of these healing procedures in the last week, and so far there had been no noted change in his vision. Every time she finished the procedure things would be the same: blackness would greet him and Sakura would be left utterly exhausted. Only once had she passed out during the healing as a result of using so much chakra. But regardless of how much effort she put in, he couldn't feel anything different.

"Sakura, it's okay," he told her, shaking his head but she did not move.

"Please, Sasuke, let me do this," she said meekly, "I feel bad for how I behaved earlier today, and I feel the need to make it up to you."

"If you want to make it up to me, go to bed and get some rest," he replied tersely.

"That would do nothing for you, though," she said, patting the mattress beside her, indicating that he was to sit. He did not move, "What good would me going to bed be? I want to do something to help you, not myself."

He walked over to the bed and sat down on the edge, refusing to get any closer to her. He spoke wearily to her when he replied. "Sakura, the mission is *tomorrow* , and I don't want you sacrificing yourself for others, me least of all."

"I'll be fine," she replied lightly, pleasantly; she wasn't taking his words seriously.

"Sakura, I mean it," he told her turning slightly towards her, "I know that if I let you try to heal my eyes tonight you'll push yourself too far."

She was quiet for a moment, looking contemplatively at the floor, her hands fidgeting in her lap. Maybe she was actually taking his words into consideration. "You know, Sasuke, it means a lot to me when you're concerned for me. But since you don't want me to heal your eyes tonight, I won't...but I'm just really just trying to make you happy."

Relieved to hear that she was not going to try and heal his eyes, he relaxed slightly; he no longer had to worry about fighting her desire to help him if she had surrendered. He examined her posture closely with his chakra sense, noting how she seemed a little crestfallen. Had she really wanted to help him that badly?

"Why do you feel the need to make everyone happy, Sakura? You work so hard for everyone else, including your father, who definitely doesn't deserve it," he lay back on the bed and stretched his hand towards hers, grasping it tightly in his own, "Don't you care about your own happiness?"

"I figure there are too many people out there who need my help to return their happiness for me to worry about my own. I feel that I can't be selfishly worrying about my own happiness while others lack it," she replied warmly, but there was a trace of sadness in it; the way she said the statement was like it was second nature to her. After a moment she added forlornly: "That what makes me so sad when I see you, Uchiha Sasuke. I *can't* restore your happiness, I can't give you what you've lost. I can't give you back your family."

As he listened to her words, he was struck with amazement. The notion was simply overwhelming to him. The fact that she would give anything to bring him happiness—he didn't deserve her unyielding sympathy. A feeling of self-loathing was creeping up on him—she could not give him back his family, and the thought made her weep, weep for him, not for herself. Her unhappiness was his doing.

"...But even though I can't give you back your clan...I can help you grow stronger so that you can avenge them—and maybe the satisfaction of killing Itachi will return some happiness to your life.

And then I'll be happy, because you have found happiness again," she murmured, her voice fading away in that way that made him feel strange. He could not give a name to that feeling. Sympathy? Pity? Regret? A longing to make her happy as well? He could never place that emotion, even though she made him feel it often, starting with the very day she promised to aid him in adjusting to his blindness.

"...And when you restore your clan, you have my promise that I will be there to help—whether it be assisting the new matriarch through labour, or merely babysitting the children."

A strange sensation had passed through him at that last statement. It was like someone had slipped a cold ice cube into his stomach, the jolt due to the sudden coldness was the best way to describe it. Hearing her speak in terms like that seemed unnatural coming from her. As a girl she had always acted like she would be the next Uchiha matriarch—yet now it seemed like she accepted the fact that that may never happen. He had never thought of who would be his matriarch—Itachi still lived and could be a threat to any family he started. He was not going to plan ahead in the event that word somehow made its way to his hated brother. Yet even though he hadn't given a second thought to who he would rebuild his clan with, it still sounded strange to hear such words from Sakura.

Subconsciously the jolt he felt was due to the shock of change—change in her, change over time in general—and the longing for things to be as they once were—back to the way things had been before he had made the mistake of leaving. Outwardly he did not know why her simple statement had had such an unnerving reaction on his demeanor.

"Don't talk like that," he told her. Her surprise was evident and he found himself wishing he hadn't spoken—her offer was a promise most people would honor, not scorn. "Don't sacrifice yourself so much for me—I am the last person who deserves help after what I've done."

"It's because of what you've done—what you've done to make yourself unworthy of my assistance—that makes you even more entitled to it," she replied tenderly, "Those who deserve help the least need it the most."

He did not know what to say to that statement. He had changed over his time with her—months ago he would have coldly told her that he didn't need her help. Now he didn't know what to say. He knew now that he needed her help, but he still didn't want it, and not because of his stubborn pride.

He simply didn't deserve it.

"...Arigato," he finally mumbled, completely at a loss for any other words.

He saw a smile flicker across her face, and she turned to him, "So, because it'll make you happy, I'll go and get ready for bed."

Her hand slipped out of his and she crawled off the edge of the bed. As he watched her stand, he felt compelled to do something, something to show his gratitude, his concern. He wanted to embrace her, pull her close to him until the need to make him happy left her head, but by the time he had mustered the courage to reach out to her, she had already disappeared from the room.

A/N: I don't have anything to say this week. Anyways, please review!

Chapter 27

A/N: At last! The dawn of the new arc! I am proud to reveal the name of this new arc: the mission arc! I'm creative with naming things, ne? XD And... I'm only going to say this once: I know Flower-chan's name is Konan. She'll be named in the story eventually—I'm working on it.

On another **VERY IMPORTANT NOTICE:** Having started school, I've found that the university workload is much larger than I expected, so I only get about half an hour to write each day...so in a nutshell, as of today (Wednesday, September 12, 2007), updates are going to occur every other week. So the next update is going to be on September 26. Thank you. If you have any questions, feel free to ask.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: The Bastardly Bastard of a Client

It was in the early hours of morning that Sakura found herself slowly coming to wakefulness. Once again she was lying on top of Sasuke's bed, having warded another one of his nightmares away, and today instead of the usual position where she was propped uncomfortably against the wall, she was lying next to him, with his arms in their usual place around her waist. Slowly she opened her eyes, and blinked a couple times in astonishment.

Sasuke's face was lying mere centimeters away from hers. She could feel his warm breath on her skin, and even count all the eyelashes on his closed eyes if she had wanted to; their noses were touching. Their proximity had caught her off guard; out of all the times she had come to him in the night, this was the first time she had ever woken up in this situation before.

A grain of temptation took root in her and sprouted, as a thought occurred to her. How easy it would be to close that gap, to move forward just a little to brush her lips on his, if only for a moment. She could steal a small kiss without him even having to know. A silent kiss, a secret kiss; her first kiss, her last kiss.

Her heart began to thump within her chest, and her fingers had started to tremble slightly. A kiss from her to him: her clandestine gift. Reaching up with her one hand, she touched his face tentatively; a quiet exhalation escaped him as her fingertips brushed his cheekbone. He appeared so peaceful right now, the cares and worries gone from his face when she was near him; she could help him in this respect, and she was glad. She withdrew her hand, for fear of waking him.

Her only kiss...

Something within her caused her to instead pull away, to detangle herself from his arms, and sit up. She looked at his face again, her distance now making his expression seem a little more troubled. She let out a quiet sigh to herself. How easy it would have been to steal a kiss from him...

...but then again, it was hard to steal a kiss that wasn't hers for the taking.

She hugged herself for a moment, banishing the selfish thoughts that were running rampant in her mind. After a moment she stood, and once she had selected clothes to wear for the mission, she proceeded to the bathroom.

It was not until Sakura's presence was definitely within the bathroom that Sasuke dared open his eyes. He lay still for a moment, listening to the sound of the shower come on in the distance, and then slowly he raised a hand to where Sakura had touched his face, the action having caused him to wake. Within his chest he could feel his heart beating a slightly faster pace; it had accelerated when his mind had

come to enough wakefulness to realize what position they were in. The instant he sensed her wakened chakra and sensed her hesitant lingering, he knew what she had thought about doing. But as he lay there, on the bed, feeling his heart rate gradually slowing, he did know whether it was apprehension that had caused it to speed up, or if it was from the thrill of anticipation.

It was as Sakura was reaching for the handle on the doors to Tsunade's office that Sasuke had to pull her away the last moment as they came flying open before she had even touched the handle. There had been a very exuberant chakra signature running towards the door, and if Sasuke had not figured out what was going to happen, Sakura most likely would have gotten the door in her face.

"What the heck took you guys so long?!" Naruto exclaimed at the two of them, his chakra blaring loudly with excitement.

Sakura seeming to still be registering what happened, so Sasuke took it upon himself to be the one to deliver the snapping reply, "Don't open the door like that, dobe, you could injure someone seriously!"

"Oi, oi," came the Fifth Hokage's voice from within the room he and Sakura had been intent on entering before being rudely prevented from doing so, "I don't want to have to deal with an argument in my office this early in the morning. Take up your arguing after I've briefed you on the mission."

Sasuke heard Naruto sigh and trudge back into the room, muttering something about it being their first mission in ages and they should make the effort to show up on time. Mentally rolling his eyes, Sasuke bit back his retort that he and Sakura were actually early for the designated arrival time.

"Um, Sasuke?" he heard the said kunoichi say, "You can let go of me now."

He gave an unreadable grunt and let go of Sakura's shoulders, which he had been clinging to protectively ever since he pulled her away from the door. He allowed her to take his arm and lead him into the office—a habit that the two of them still kept, despite the fact that he could technically 'see' now—where she took a position next to Naruto. Currently he was not 'seeing' anything because he decided to conserve on his chakra and allow Sakura to guide him until he was required to use his senses.

"Anosa, anosa," Naruto said suddenly from on the other side of Sakura where Sasuke was currently standing, "Where's Kakashi-sensei? He's a part of our team, after all."

"He's probably late," Sakura said, sounding mildly disgusted, "Even after two and a half years when you came back from *your* training, Naruto, he was still late for our mission, remember?"

Sasuke found interest sparking; Sakura didn't speak much about what she had been doing the time when he was away. He had always assumed things, like her medical skills, her taijutsu training, genjutsu, among other things, like her depression, but he hadn't been aware that she had gone on missions with Naruto and Kakashi. He wondered dimly if there had been someone had replaced his position on the team.

"Actually," the Godaime spoke up at the comment, "Kakashi is away on a more pressing mission at the moment—with Sakura's father incidentally. So he won't be joining you on this mission. Technically he was just your teacher, a mentor during your genin days. You are chuunin now—with the exception of Sasuke—so while there may be the occasional mission that he will accompany you on, don't expect him to be around all the time. Anyways, the mission. You all have a rough idea what's going on?"

"A delegate from Kumogakure," Sakura stated like it had been a classroom question that she knew the answer to.

"I don't see why we have to go on an escort mission," Naruto complained with clear dissatisfaction, "Why can't the delegate use Kumo's ninja to escort him here and back?"

"Naruto, be grateful that you get a mission ranked this high!" the woman snapped back at him, "If Sakura and Sasuke hadn't insisted, you could have been herding livestock instead."

Naruto promptly fell into silence.

"As for the answer to your question, there are a number of political reasons for this," she continued as if nothing had happened; Sasuke got the impression she had had many similar confrontations with Naruto, "First of all, you might remember, Sakura, that when you came to see me about this mission that I mentioned the Raikage wanted to have January's Chuunin Exam held in Kumo. Well, our relations with Kumo have been a little strained of late, so this is an act of good faith. Depending on how you perform on this mission, hopefully tension will slacken a bit. It's not to the brink of war, but Kumo's Raikage doesn't particularly like us at the moment.

"Additionally, your client's stay in Konoha has been over a long period of time, having represented Kumo for the planning committee of the Chuunin Exam. So asking any Cloud Shinobi to stay during that period of time would be time idly wasted as they could be serving their village elsewhere. Thus there are no Cloud escorts for the delegate, which is why it is up to you three to get the mission done. Lastly, this delegate is not shinobi, so he is quite unable to take care of himself at the hands of bandits, thieves and would-be murders from rival villages. Any questions?"

There was a pause. "Does this delegate have a name?" Sakura was the only one who spoke.

"Ah, good point. Your client's name is Tokugawa Manzo," Tsunade informed her, and then after a moment, a sheet of paper rustled and Sakura took a step forward, most likely to grab the sheet.

"Age: forty-five. Vice-president of Kumogakure's council, married, two children, and favourite food is natto," Sakura read off the sheet, "Don't miss any details, do we?"

"Where is this Tokugawa Manzo?" Sasuke asked, noting that aside from Sakura, Naruto and the Hokage, there were no other presences nearby.

"He is to meet us here; we will discuss the mission until he arrives," the Godaime replied, "Let's see what else is there. Oh, Sakura will be team leader for this mission."

"What?" both Naruto and Sakura asked at the same time, both seeming equally surprised.

"Well, Sasuke can't be team leader because he's on probation, and Naruto, I've met Manzo, having you as team leader most likely would end up in mission failure," Tsunade said curtly, "Sakura is the best for the job, and I know she'll keep the mission together."

Sasuke smirked slightly at this while Naruto grumbled quietly to himself. Sakura on the other hand remained silent.

"Lastly, here's a map with a suggested route marked on it for the journey, I must warn you however," Tsunade said noises indicated she was taking something from a desk drawer, "The route passes very close to the Sound Country, be very careful on your way, as we do not want to get involved with Orochimaru's goons. I also assume that Sasuke doesn't want run into his former associates."

"It's most likely that they think I'm dead," he replied evenly, "And I would prefer it to remain that way."

"Noted," was the given reply, "Anyways, Sakura, you might want to take a look at that map. And, now all we have left to do is wait for our client; it's strange, he's not one to show up late. I wonder where he could be."

It was then that Sasuke became aware of a presence hurriedly making its way toward their location. Their client perhaps? He frowned slightly, he would have thought a delegate would be a little more proper, and hold a political-like attitude rather than come careening down the hallways of the Hokage's Tower. The signature veered around the corner outside and sprinted towards the door, a few seconds later it flew open and a panting figure entered.

"Tsunade-sama!" it wasn't the client, Sasuke noted with irritation, it was the Hokage's secretary—what was her name, Shizune? "I—have been—looking—all over for—Team Seven. Tokugawa—Manzo—wishes to meet them—at the front gates—for departure. Doesn't—want them—to be late."

She sounded rather winded, like she had been hurrying to find them so they could meet their client on time.

"Better—leave now," she added, seeming to address the team rather than the Hokage.

"Alright then, good luck you three and travel safely," Tsunade told them with resolution, "Oh, one last thing Sasuke. Would you like a new headband? I can give you one now, before you go."

He shook his head firmly over his shoulder. "I'll keep it," he told her evenly, "For...sentimental reasons."

Sakura gave an impatient tug, pulling him from the room, Naruto on his tail as they rushed out of the building to meet their client.

Sakura had no difficulty picking out their client standing at the front gates of the village, he was standing off to the side, alone, tapping his foot impatiently. As they drew closer to him, she offered a greeting, bowing respectfully to him.

"Ohayo gozaimasu, Tokugawa Manzo-san," she said politely as she straightened up, "I am Haruno Sakura, this is Uzumaki Naruto and

Uchiha Sasuke. We will be the team that will escort you back home."

The man looked down at her and she took a moment to examine his features. He had a harsh-looking face, lines of aging scoring his face and his hair was beginning to grey. He was rather tall and held himself with an air that just screamed 'politician', his eyebrows were knitted together in the stereotypical politician's frown. His gaze was critical and his eyes narrowed; his chin was rather square.

"You're late," he said gruffly to her, tearing his gaze away from her to study Naruto and Sasuke.

"My apologies," she said hastily, "We just were given the news that you wished to meet us here. We were unaware that there had been change in—"

"I won't have a couple escorting me to my homeland," he cut in abruptly, his eyes fixed on her arm that was linked with Sasuke's.

"Oh, we're not—" Sakura felt herself reddening, "He requires my assistance during traveling, that is all."

He turned back to her and raised an eyebrow at her, "How can I expect you to protect me if your own teammates need help traveling?"

"Sasuke's more than he looks," Naruto replied angrily, "He'll kick the asses of anyone who might attack you, and don't you forget it."

There was a contemplative pause from their client, and he studied Sasuke with mild interest. After a moment, a frown appeared on his face, "Why don't you look me in the eye, son? ...Unless..."

He waved a hand in front of Sasuke's face, and Sasuke scowled. "What are you doing?" he demanded tersely.

"You're blind," Tokugawa Manzo stated critically, before turning and walking down the path, "Is this the best the Hokage could come up

with? I must say I'm disappointed."

"Oi! You bastard, don't underestimate us!" Naruto hollered at his back, "We're Konoha shinobi and we see our missions through to the very end!"

"I'll believe it when I see it," their client retorted, "At this rate it'll be a miracle if we survive the first day."

Naruto was pushing up his sleeves but Sakura grabbed his shoulder and shook her head firmly. As much of a...well, ass ...their client was turning out to be, they had to see the mission through—not only was it because they were entrusted to the task, but because it would help Konoha and Kumo relations. Sighing she led the two of them forwards, hoping that things would get better as they went along.

They didn't. In fact, things seemed to be getting worse. After the first fifteen minutes, Sakura had shared her travel plans with Tokugawa and was immediately told, with sincere astonishment, that he had been surprised she had thought that far ahead. After another forty-five minutes of silence, she had attempted casual conversation (Naruto and Sasuke had refused to speak to the man), only to wind up snubbed. The man was really insufferable, and while she shared in Sasuke and Naruto's desire to beat the man to a pulp, she knew that that she could not do that.

The group of them was rather scattered, being well within the Land of Fire's borders they were not expecting any trouble. As they were walking Naruto was somewhat in the lead while Tokugawa was walking off to the side of Sasuke and Sakura. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him keep eying their linked arms with a skeptical expression on his face. She had ignored it for the better part of an hour, and was going to comment on it when he suddenly veered his walking path and fell in step on the other side of Sasuke.

"So, you're an Uchiha, huh?" he asked casually, studying Sasuke with interest.

Sasuke nodded mutely in reply.

"A blind Uchiha," Tokugawa Manzo said more to himself than to Sasuke, "That must have been hard, losing your kekkei genkai. You *were* able to use the Sharingan, right?"

"Of course," Sasuke stated coldly, an offended aura radiating off of him; Sakura would have given his hand a discreet squeeze had she been holding onto it.

"So, how'd you end up blind?" the delegate continued, seeming not to notice Sasuke's dark demeanor.

"I lost my sight to a kunai," Sasuke replied evenly between somewhat gritted teeth.

Ahead of them, Sakura noticed Naruto slow his pace slightly; Naruto probably hadn't heard how Sasuke lost his vision—and now that she thought about it, neither did she. At least, not in detail. He had mentioned in the hospital that he had lost his sight to a kunai knife—back when she was interrogating him and he did not know who she was, but he had never stated the circumstances.

"In a battle?" Tokugawa asked, his voice gruff and far from curious, more like analytical.

"More like a...struggle," Sasuke replied, before promptly turning the interrogation around, "And what about you? You too have seen struggles of your own, why else would you walk with a limp?"

Sakura's desire to know the circumstances under which Sasuke lost his sight was pushed aside as she was surprised by his comment. Naruto looked over his shoulder at their client for a moment, studying him passively before looking onwards again. Sakura had looked too, and though it was barely noticeable, he did indeed walk with a slight limp.

"An enemy village raid," he said too quickly for Sakura to completely end up believing him, and he distanced himself a little from Sasuke as he spoke, "Misfortune, nothing more."

"I'm sure," Sasuke replied dryly, and Sakura knew that Sasuke definitely didn't believe him.

Both were silent after that, and they fell into their regular formation again. Sakura looked over at their client, and back to Sasuke; both of them were both bristling with a defensive air, and she had a feeling that the two of them were both keeping more to themselves than they were saying.

Evening had apparently fallen, and the only previous indication was that the temperature in the air had fallen significantly; the confirming factor was when Sakura called the group to a halt and suggested they set up camp in a small clearing on the side of the road. It was then that Sasuke had let go of Sakura's arm; he had told her that it was the end of the day and any chakra he used now would be replenished overnight, but that was not the only reason he had departed from her side. He had felt the eyes of the client on them all day, and even though they were mere glances, it had not escaped his notice.

However this in turn brought more staring upon him by both Naruto and the client. Sasuke tried to ignore them for the most part, Sasuke knowing Naruto hadn't really seen him use his chakra senses to 'see' before, and that was understandable. The client on the other hand was staring at him as he rolled open his sleeping bag. Sasuke growled; even though the man was behind him, he could see him quite clearly and he was irked at being gawked at like some amazing spectacle.

"What is it, Tokugawa?" he asked coldly, straightening up and turning his head slightly to give better indication he was paying attention to the man, "Is there something crawling on my back that you must stare at it so insistently?"

Sakura looked up from the map she was looking at and turned her gaze towards their client, Naruto stopped rummaging through his backpack to look at the man as well.

"No," was the gruff reply and he quickly averted his gaze, pretending to look for something within his own backpack.

Satisfied that he would not be bothered for a while yet, Sasuke finished setting up his belongings and turned to stoke the fire that Naruto had started with a little assistance from his own Gokakyuu no jutsu. A few minutes later, Sakura came and sat herself beside him, throwing a couple of idle twigs into the flames.

"Do you think we should set a watch tonight?" she asked him, turning her gaze upon his face.

He frowned slightly, "Why ask me?"

"You can sense people's chakra signatures at a significant distance, and I want you to advise me," she replied with a mellow smile, "Do you think that think that we should set a watch for tonight; have you sensed anyone nearby that you think would be out of place?"

He closed his eyes to show contemplation and quit cutting off chakra to keep his surroundings from distracting him. There was no one in the vicinity as far as he could tell; the only signatures that he could detect were those of Naruto, Sakura, and the delegate from Kumogakure. In fact, they hadn't run into anyone at all that day; at first he had considered this a good thing, but now as he reflected on it, he began to wonder if it was a bit too strange.

"How often is this road traveled?" he asked her, hoping that she knew the terrain well enough to answer accurately.

"I can't rightly say, I haven't been down this road for a while, but usually you do meet a couple people who are traveling," she replied evenly, taking the branch that had been idle in his hands and prodding the fire with it.

He opened his eyes and resumed emitting chakra, so that he could see her face clearly, "I don't know this area that well, and if I once did—" he said this part in a lower tone so that Tokugawa could not hear—"I don't remember, but I think it's a little odd that we have met no one at all, and that there has been no chakra signatures pass into my awareness since we started on this trip. I think to be safe we should take shifts."

Sakura nodded mutely, staring hypnotically at the fire for a moment. Sasuke turned his gaze towards it as well, trying to see it with his chakra. As the fire was not a solid substance exactly, it was difficult to see with chakra, only catching snatches of it and seeing small incomplete wisps. He could see clearly the kettle that was hoisted above the logs with a spit, but the flames were almost invisible to him. In this sense, he had to be careful around it. If he wanted water from the kettle, he would have to ask someone to get it for him, or he could inadvertently stick his hand into the flames. He also could not sit too close, or an article of clothing may catch fire and he would not be able to tell until he smelled the burnt cloth, saw the fabric deteriorate or until he was burned. Looking at the fire was like he was trying to see the air—which he could not see at all with chakra—and other times it was like looking at a thin tendril of water.

Water itself was a strange thing to behold; he could see the surface, but it was opaque, and he could not see below the shifting skin. A glass of water could be mistaken for something like milk to him, and he relied on his senses of smell and taste to find out what the contents were before he drank anything. Even though he could now 'see' with his chakra, he still had to depend on his basic senses in the cases of water and fire.

"Oi, Naruto," Sakura turned and looked over at Naruto, seeming broken from the fire's hypnotic dance, "We're going to be taking shifts. First dibs if you want any particular position."

"I'll take last shift," Naruto called hastily before anyone else could make the claim, and then quickly turning his attention back to the cup of instant ramen he had made himself.

"Sasuke?"

He shrugged, "Whatever you want is fine."

"I'm not taking a watch, just so you know," Tokugawa put in from across the fire pit; he had a large tome in his lap and was reading it devotedly—apparently he wasn't immersed enough in order to miss the discussion of shift work.

"I didn't expect you to," Sakura replied politely; the fact that the client was not taking a shift did not bother Sasuke. Most times the clients never took any shifts even if they offered; what bothered Sasuke was that this man actually went out of his way to establish that he would not even consider taking a shift.

' He's almost more of a bastard than Sakura's father,' Sasuke mused wryly to himself.

"I'll take middle shift," Sakura told him, and Sasuke frowned slightly.

"You're taking middle shift so that I don't have to wake up in the middle of the night—I'll get a solid night's sleep," he accused her perceptively, "I'll take middle shift. You get some rest Sakura."

He tried to turn his head towards her in order to give her an emphasizing stare—he wasn't sure if it worked or not, but she averted her gaze back to the fire. She knew well enough that he wanted her to get a good night's sleep, and he was not about to let her have the middle shift, one that would most likely result in the least sleep attained. First shift wasn't so bad in that after your shift you could sleep the rest of the night. Last shift was good in the sense that it was more or less like waking up early in the morning. Middle shift was the worst one; it took a while to fall asleep at night, especially if in a foreign location, and then to be woken up not too long afterwards ensured a small duration of sleep. Then after the shift was over, it took a while to sleep again and then to be woken up after a short segment meant that there was little sleep acquired over

the night. Of course the first and last shifts would take a while to sleep as well, but the sleeping hours were not broken up.

"No, Sasuke, I'll take middle shift," she told him firmly, "It's okay."

"How about you both stop bickering like a married couple, make the kid with the ramen take middle shift, and allow us all to get some rest?" their client interrupted and Sasuke glowered in his general direction. Naruto made an indignant noise at being referred to as 'the kid with the ramen.'

"Sakura, I'm taking the middle shift," he told her in a manner that left no room for argument; he got up and went to his sleeping bag, "Wake me up when it's time for my shift. I'm going to bed."

With that, he crawled into his sleeping bag, with his back to the group of them, preventing any further dispute.

Even though Sasuke had gone to bed earlier than the others, Sakura knew that he was still lying awake in his sleeping bag, simply not moving. Even though he was trying his best to pretend to be, he was holding too still for him to actually be asleep. She sat on top of her sleeping bag with the map of the Fire Country and its neighbors sitting on her lap, planning out the route that they would take, making use of her time. At first she pretended not to know he was awake, hoping he would doze off eventually, but half an hour had passed now.

"If you're not going to sleep then you should have taken the first shift, or at least have the courtesy to keep me company, Sasuke," she said quietly to keep from waking the others, there was a small smile on her face, "I know you're awake, stop pretending."

He did not move for a moment but after a while he consigned to rolling over and lying so he could speak to her, "You've been tired, I don't want you falling asleep on your watch."

"If you're worried I'll fall asleep you should have let me take the middle shift," she retorted quietly, looking up from the map and redirecting her attention to him.

He just gave a simple shrug, brushing it off, "What are you doing?"

"Here, I'll show you," she said, getting to her feet. The sleeping bags were arranged in a ring around the fire and hers was set up between Sasuke's and Tokugawa Manzo's, directly opposite of Naruto's. Walking the short distance between their sleeping bags she sat down next to him and spread out the map before both of them, "I'm planning out the route we will take in order to get to Kumo."

He propped himself up on his elbows and closed his eyes, most likely focusing his chakra on the map. After a moment his eyes slid open again and he shook his head, "I can't see it."

She tilted her head slightly in confusion and then she understood, "Oh...the map, you can't see the ink on it, can you?"

He shook his head, "It's like looking at a blank sheet of paper—I can see the crease marks where it's been folded and worn but it's blank."

Taking this new information into consideration she looked around her; she picked up a few stray sticks and a leaf that lay within her grasp. She took the sticks and formed a rough square around the Land of Fire and put the leaf in the center. Next, with the few remaining sticks she created a triangular extension off the square where the Land of Lightning lay. A small pebble was placed where Kumogakure was.

"Okay, it's crude, but I hope you get it," she told him; looking at him she saw that he wore a very amused expression on his face, obviously humored by her attempt to reconstruct the terrain on the piece of paper, "This the Fire Country and this is the Lightning Country; we're about here—" she pointed at a point on the map in the north east corner of her square, "—and I hope by tomorrow we'll be at the border. After that it'll take two days to travel on foot across

the two countries that lie in between the border and Lightning. Five days from that border and we should reach our destination. The road is relatively straight, so I hope it won't take too long. I'm trying to keep the route farther away from Sound though, I know you don't want to go there."

He gave a nod, "The Hokage made a good decision to make you team leader, Sakura."

"Thank you," she replied mellowly, clearing the debris from the map's surface. As she folded it up, a thought came across her mind, "Sasuke, you said looking at the map is like looking at a blank sheet of paper. You can't see through windows or glass, can you?"

He shook his head again, "No."

She fell silent after his simple response; she recalled a few days ago, as she was packing up her things to prepare for the journey, she had seen Sasuke sitting on the couch in the living room, holding a picture frame in his hands, holding it carefully. She hadn't thought much of it at the time, thinking that he must be looking at all the pictures he hadn't seen in years; it hadn't occurred to her that he *couldn't* see them, regardless of his chakra senses. The picture he had been holding in his hands, she saw later, was one of his family, a picture of him with his parents and Itachi.

She stared at the map in her hands for a while, contemplating this. How could she possibly be able to show him a picture? Aside from restoring his vision, there was little she could do, and the restoration of his vision was uncertain as it was. Turning the map over in her hands she noted how the light from the fire cast different shadows over the creases and fold in the marred paper. He could see those, she noted blithely, too bad she couldn't scratch an outline on his family photos... Wait, an outline...or better yet, a raised surface. A pencil, which she had been using to make markings on the map, rested behind her ear, and she grabbed it now. If she wrote lightly on the paper, Sasuke would be unable to read the message and she would be able to surprise him.

Get embossed copy of family photos made.

Those were the simple words she scrawled on the map, glancing surreptitiously at Sasuke she saw that he had closed his eyes and was resting his head on his arms. She prodded him gently and he grunted lightly to let her know that he was still awake.

"Hey, I was thinking that maybe I could try healing your eyes," she offered quietly so that she wouldn't wake the others.

"No, Sakura," he told her evenly, a tone in his voice suggesting that he was very serious about it.

"Sasuke, please, I'm not going to be using my chakra for anything else, and it's not like it takes all of my chakra," she told him; actually it used most of her chakra, the special healing method she developed required a lot of her stamina, but she wasn't going to let Sasuke know that, "Please? It'll end up replenished overnight anyways."

He was silent for a minute, and then slowly he nodded. He rolled over onto his back and she shuffled over to him. When his head was cradled in her lap, she placed her fingers on the chakra points and began to apply the chakra. From her fingertips she wound the green through his chakra circulatory system, around the optic nerve and washing over the back of the retina. She redirected it so that it flowed through his inner eye, and along the choroid layer and around the muscles attached to the ciliary body.

Slowly as the shift wore on, she worked with her chakra, nudging and prompting the nerve cells and muscle cells to come to become functional again. They weren't dead, she realized, the first time she attempted this, but rather they were, in a sense, shut off—dormant—just needing the proper stimulus to get them to all work again. If she could at least revive a few cells, then perhaps he could see a little bit. It would take time, one cell at a time.

Time seemed to have no domain anymore, as it seemed to pass slowly and quickly at the same time. Nothing existed outside her concentration, just the chakra and her task. It was like it had been when she was first healing Sasuke back at the hospital when she hadn't realized that he was the young man so near death. Committed to her task, nothing could distract her...save for Sasuke laying his hands on top of hers. She opened her eyes for a moment to look and see if it hadn't been something her mind had conjured up, but it was exactly as she had thought. Sasuke had indeed put his hands on top of hers, holding them gently against his face. A small smile tugged at her lips as she closed her eyes again, a feeling of contentment flowering within her.

A/N: Yeah, yeah, I know. Some of you were expecting Kakashi on this mission, but I kinda felt that he wouldn't really be involved with Team Seven as much anymore once they became chuunin. After all, they're not fledgling ninja anymore; and besides he currently has more important missions to attend to. You'll see in good time, my readers.

Terminology

Ohayo gozaimasu - polite version of bidding someone a good morning

Chapter 28

A/N: laalalallalalalalalalalalalalalala...(runs around) You know why you're here :p

Chapter Twenty-Eight: The First Indications of Trouble

Out of all the healing procedures Sasuke had previously been through with Sakura, this was the first where he had fallen asleep. Even when he was conscious, strange thoughts had drifted across his relaxed mind, inciting him to succumb to those thoughts, wheedling at him to do what his subconscious wished him to do. It wasn't until he actually felt Sakura's hands underneath his that he realized that he had submitted to the longing desire to hold her hands against his face. A small jolt had run through him then, causing the euphoric dreamy thoughts to halt slightly; he had decided it would do more harm than good to remove his hands after that, and the thoughts resumed—he secretly did not want to move his hands in the least.

Now as he slept, his dreams were just as strange as his conscious thoughts, images of Sakura's smiling face coming to mind, and thoughts of holding her safely in his arms floated by as well. Like most dreams, the images and messages didn't make sense, going nowhere and somewhere at the same time; he was with Sakura, running through the green field that Sakura had showed him in a genjutsu. They were holding hands and dashing through the grasses, trying to find something, what it was he wasn't sure, but it didn't matter, reason seldom did in dreams.

Suddenly the two of them were looking at a large map sitting lying on the ground before them, and Sakura was kneeling over it, her fingers tracing the images inscribed on the map. She looked at him with a smile and pointed to the Land of Waves.

" There are problems there," she told him, a smile on her face, "In order for anyone to be safe we have to get rid of problems."

He gave a nod in understanding, though it made no sense whatsoever.

"And of course there are outposts here..."

The scene changed. He was standing in a dark room, the only light cast by a lamp hanging over a table that was in front of him. The map from before was lying on the table, but he wasn't with Sakura anymore. His garb was that which he wore while working for Orochimaru, and his hands were clasped lightly behind his back, as he was bent over the paper on the table.

"... here...here...and here," Kabuto told him from his left, and Sasuke nodded in understanding, "Orochimaru-sama wishes this attack to be carried swiftly and efficiently. You are to follow orders this time, he will not have a repeat on the raid of Kumo."

He glowered at the silver-haired medic but gave a nod, *"I understand."*

" That's good, Sasuke-kun," came Orochimaru's voice as he stepped out from the shadows, *"We can't have you in the thick of things when we attack Konoha, you might end up getting gravely injured, and we wouldn't want that, now would we?"*

Contempt flowed through his blood as he looked at the Sannin, but he met the gaze evenly, not looking away. After the length of the staring match had been drawn out, Orochimaru grinned wickedly and walked up to the table, breaking his gaze.

" Still as defiant as ever, Sasuke-kun," was all the Snake Sanin said before looking down at the map, *"But you will be on guard duty. You will guard our escape route if anything goes wrong. This time we will crush Konoha or forfeit."*

"It's your turn to guard everyone," Kabuto told him evenly, and Sasuke met the medic's gaze with hatred; Kabuto ignored this, "You have to protect everyone, it is your turn to do the protecting."

There was something strange about the voice. It was fading away, along with the scene.

"You have to protect everyone...everyone's depending on you. You know what happened last time you failed to protect everyone... You don't want that to happen again."

The voice was fading from Kabuto's to one that was so familiar to him, yet he couldn't place it. It was similar to Itachi's but it wasn't that of his brother.

"... What would happen if you couldn't protect everyone? Is your hatred strong enough yet?"

It was his own voice, his own voice speaking to him now, a black void enveloping him.

"... Are you strong enough...?"

"...your turn to guard everyone... ..Sasuke?"

He was being shaken awake.

"Sasuke! Wake up," Sakura hissed, her hand shaking his shoulder insistently, "It's your turn to take watch."

Blinking awake he sat up abruptly the dream flashing through his mind like it was replaying itself before his eyes. It was her voice that had caused him to wake, he realized, as soon as she was whispering to him about his shift, the dream had changed. A few moments longer, he was certain, if the dream had lasted a few minutes longer, then maybe he could have found out when Konoha was to be attacked. It was no ordinary dream, he knew, for the events in the dark room were too precise, too real; now that he was

thinking about it, he knew what it was. He had somehow unlocked a piece of his memory, one that had been supposedly wiped by Kabuto.

"Sasuke, are you okay?" Sakura asked him, causing him to jump in surprise slightly. He turned his chakra senses on her, the image of her in his head painting so quickly and clearly he could see that worry marred her facial features instantly.

"I'm fine," he replied, "It's nothing."

"Are you sure?" she asked with concern, "Was it a..." She reached out and grabbed his hand, scrawling on the palm of his hand. " ... *nightmare?* " she finished.

He shook his head firmly, "That only happens at home...not when I travel."

She nodded her head in understanding before getting to her feet and wandering over to her sleeping bag. She studied him for a moment after crawling in, her expression thoughtful. When using chakra senses, everyone had white eyes, the iris and the pupil being no different in texture than the whites of the eyes, and at times like this, when Sakura chose to observe him in such a manner, it was a little unnerving. Her mind seemed to be done with whatever pensive thoughts that were running through her head, and she lay down, her face towards the fire.

"Goodnight, Sasuke," she told him as she closed her eyes.

"Goodnight."

It was the third day since they had left Konoha, and Sakura was passing the time by first calculating how many hours it would take to reach Kumogakure and then slowly counting off each hour as it passed. There had been awkward silences all day yesterday and it was a little unnerving. Their client didn't seem the least bit impressed

that Sasuke was still hanging onto her arm while they were walking, pointing out that it was obvious that he could walk on his own.

"Why don't you walk on your own if it's so clear that you can?" Tokugawa demanded of Sasuke as they began yesterday's journey across the terrain.

"It wastes chakra," Sasuke had replied coldly, "And it's better to keep it reserved in the likely event that we may be attacked."

"Likely event?" was the nervous reply.

"This mission wasn't ranked B for no reason," Sasuke replied logically, "I assume that it's because the path is so close to Oto."

Tokugawa Manzo had fallen silent after that, not saying much more. Ever since then, Sasuke can been almost completely preoccupied; when asked about it, he had refused to elaborate, but Sakura had a feeling there was something important going on in his mind. Even as the day wore on, he seemed out of it, concentrating, yet not, at the same time. He was aware of everything going on around him, but he never really acknowledged it until addressed.

By afternoon, rain had swept down upon them, and they had to stop in order to dig rain gear out from their bags. The rain put a heavier damper on the mood and now they were also damp in addition to silent. Keeping an eye on their client ahead of them, Sakura noted that he too seemed preoccupied, but in an entirely different manner than Sasuke was. The politician was nervous, it was apparent, and he kept glancing around them, as if he was expecting someone to attack them. Actually, reflecting on it, Sakura noted that he had been that nervous since they had crossed the border into the non-shinobi country that shared a border with Oto.

"Sasuke, is there anyone near us?" she asked the young man whose arms she was linked with, her voice slightly raised so he could hear her above the rain. She knew that he would alert them if anyone was growing close to them, but there was no harm in being certain. Their

client was antsy enough to make her wonder if there was something behind his nervousness, a direct cause for fear.

"No," Sasuke replied with a shake of his head, and then his face darkened into a frown, "It's strange, this road has been devoid of life since we started traveling it."

"That is a bit suspicious," Sakura murmured, her breath coming visible in the cool air, "None whatsoever?"

"I haven't been checking for animals, but other than that, there has been—"

His voice cut off and he stopped still, his frown deepening.

"Stop you two," Sakura called out hastily to Naruto and the delegate, who turned and faced her, "Sasuke...?"

"People are coming," he said incredulously, "This way, and quickly."

"What? Are they coming for us?"

He gave a shrug. Of course he couldn't know, she noted grimly, he could only sense them coming, not their intent. Sasuke had said that there had been no presences of other chakra signatures since they left, and now there were people coming their direction. If there had been no one near, nobody would know they were there, so chances were they were not the targets. For all they knew, it could be people on horseback traveling this road just as they were.

"Okay, we'll keep moving, but Naruto, be on guard, and Sasuke, and be sure to let me know of anything suspicious. If no one has been near us, chances are they aren't looking for us," she ordered as she tugged Sasuke forward to resume moving, "Tokugawa-san, please stay between Naruto, Sasuke, and I. Sasuke, I'm going to let go of you; triangle formation."

The three of them dispersed and formed a triangle around Tokugawa; Naruto was looking ahead, his face determined, Sasuke had his hands casually at his side, but they were positioned so that he could grab a weapon at an instant if necessary. She herself kept a careful eye on the client, and noted that his nervousness had increased, and he was now fidgeting to himself.

"Sakura!" Sasuke called to her suddenly, "They're not traveling on the road, they're in the trees."

That was *definitely* suspicious. "Okay, get close to Tokugawa-san. We'll avoid combat if possible, attack only when I say."

The three of them surrounded the politician, weapons drawn and at the ready. Her eyes were wandering around the area, looking for the slightest movement. It could be a party of ninja just passing through, but she did not want to take any risks.

"Sakura-chan, I see someone," Naruto said suddenly from where he was standing. All eyes were suddenly turned down the road; there was a figure looming towards them, and the rain kept their face from showing. Sakura tightened her grip on her kunai, and braced herself.

"Sasuke?" she asked quietly, trying to glean any more information before the man came within earshot—for it was indeed a man—but Sasuke shook his head.

"They're from Sound," he muttered to her, "It doesn't matter how quiet you are, they will hear you."

"That's right," came a gravelly voice from the person in front of them, even though he would have not been close enough to hear the comment unless he were standing right close to them, "How perceptive you are."

Sakura could see the headband now, the musical note catching the light. She cast a glance at Sasuke, who was clutching his kunai so

hard that his hand was shaking; biting her lip she looked at the man again.

"We don't want any trouble, so call off your teammates and let us pass," she announced resolutely to him, her voice clear to carry to whoever else was nearby and in hiding.

"Clever girl for realizing there is more than just me," there was a earthy chuckle from the Sound nin, "Unfortunately, I cannot let you go. We need that man who is in your possession, and we will not leave without him."

"Then you won't leave at all," she replied coldly, "He's staying with us, and you'll be dead."

"So be it," was the only reply before the man disappeared from the vicinity.

Shocked, she looked around wildly for where he might have gone, seeing nothing. Naruto let out a shout of surprise and was mimicking her and looking around. Sasuke however threw his kunai right where the man had been standing, and there was another shout, this time from their attacker. He appeared into view again, the kunai embedded deep in his shoulder.

The man looked at his wound before pulling out the kunai. He looked at them with a keen eye, "A pretty good shot for someone who wasn't even looking where he was throwing, or could see where I was."

Sakura looked at Sasuke. He had realized the man hadn't moved, a chakra signature confirming that; sound, that was the answer. Sound had masked the man's position by distorting the light waves, and he had disappeared from sight. Suddenly there were many ninja surrounding them, all of the same face and appearance, looming out in the rain. About to attack, she poised her kunai at the ready, but stopped for a split second. The rain was falling through them, water

wasn't drenching them; was it another manipulation from sound, she wondered.

"Go!" she shouted at her two teammates, "Protect Tokugawa-san!"

The three of them were off, and soon the chaos that followed battle ensued. There were apparently four others hiding in the brush and they joined the melee at her shout. She dashed in and among them, cutting her way through flesh and blood where she found it. The illusions were hard to tell from the real ones, the only indication that there were people there by the small drops that were soaking into the cloth. As she fought, Sakura blanked her mind, forbidding herself to wonder why they wanted Kumo's delegate. That would have to be asked later.

This was not good, Sasuke noted with irritation. Not that they were losing or anything like that, he was more concerned that he would be recognized among the ninja present. He didn't recognize any of them; they seemed to be chuunin like themselves—or rather like Naruto and Sakura—and he had known very few so low down in Oto's ranks. However news does travel fast, and even if just one of them recognized him, he knew it would be difficult to keep it from getting out.

He also didn't want to kill anyone; he was a shinobi of Konoha and he was a man with morals. It was during his time with Orochimaru that he swore to himself that he would not kill—he would not do Orochimaru's dirty work, he would not kill anyone who was unfortunate enough to work for the Sannin. This last thought processed through his mind as he stabbed one of the ninja in a crippling, but non-vital, spot. Around him the sounds of kunai against kunai rang in the air, and there were a number of Naruto's kage bunshins running around. Sakura was doing well it seemed against the leader, whose shoulder was still oozing blood.

A presence caught his attention as one of the sound ninja's slipped into the tree line in hopes of hiding from the three of them, but he

was not so easily fooled. He tore after the signature, dodging through the trees. If even one escaped, there would be hell to pay. There was already hell to pay, he noted grimly—the absence of these ninja would be noticed and more would be sent, and this time it would be jounin, not chuunin. Oto did not have an ANBU squad, but he knew that there were plenty of capable people working in Oto that could attain that rank if such thing existed in the Sound Village.

The sound ninja ahead of him swore loudly as he realized he was being pursued and veered back into the battle area, hoping to confuse him. Of course that didn't work. Amid all the signatures on the battlefield, he could tell which one belonged to his prey quite easily, and he was locked onto it. Suddenly the ninja veered off again, and this time it was headed towards Sakura, who was otherwise preoccupied with one of the Sound nin's companions. Worry gripped him as he saw the ninja draw a kunai, clearly intent on taking out Sakura while he zoomed past, aiding his teammate. He could catch him before that happened, if he hurried enough, he calculated. But then a complication arose.

Behind him another ninja was sneaking closer to their client. Naruto was busy, his five bunshins and himself chasing the other remaining shinobi through the trees. There was no one left to guard their client. Sakura was unaware of the approaching danger, but their client was in equal danger. There was no way to save them both. Client or Sakura? Bastard or friend? Casualty or mission failure?

His mind was racing; he hated decisions like this, and he only had a few more spare seconds to make it in. The last decision he had to make like this was when whether to leave Konoha or not, and he had picked the wrong answer, he had made a mistake. What if he did the same again?

Sakura or delegate?

Sakura, half of him screamed at him, while the other half screamed for him to protect the delegate.

What would happen if you couldn't protect everyone...?

Delegate.

But not before he did something to aid Sakura.

"Sakura!" he shouted loudly across the field, "Behind you!"

He himself redirected his movement and lunged at their client, arriving just in time to land a heavy blow to the Sound nin's chest. He could have hit his head, but he knew that would have fractured the skull, causing instant death, instead he had hit the torso and savored the satisfaction of ribs breaking.

The entire escapade hadn't gone without his chakra sense trained on Sakura; the instant she had heard his shout, she landed one last punch on her ninja, the face caving in grotesquely. She had then spun around hurriedly, her hand full of so much chakra it was a few notches below becoming visible like the Chidori did. What she did next surprised him, as she didn't try and punch the oncoming ninja, which would have been difficult due to her current stance, but instead hit the ground. She released the chakra from her hand the exact instant her fist hit the ground, and instantly there was a loud crumbling and quaking as the earth shattered.

' *When did she...?* ' his thoughts were cut off abruptly as he realized that even though the earth had shattered, it was still breaking up and coming directly at him and the client. There was no time to think, and he grabbed the man, roughly picking him up off the ground. Using enough chakra in his feet to repel them from the ground a good distance, they leapt forward just before the ground beneath their feet broke apart from Sakura's punch. Landing gracefully in a tree, Sasuke ignored their bastard of a client's complaints from being grabbed so roughly.

Sakura had never displayed any of that strength during their training together; how much strength had she acquired during his absence? How strong had she really become? She was definitely not showing

him the full extent of her power, and he had a sneaking suspicion that he had barely scratched the surface. Naruto was now beating upon one of the two remaining sound ninja, having finally caught up with him, but where was the other?

The signature was near to Sakura, Sasuke realized, but it was alone, he noticed—it must have gotten rid of the bunshins. Naruto's bunshins were difficult to be rid of, Sasuke noted with concern, so how had he done—?

Again his thoughts were forcefully cut off. The sound ninja was moving towards Sakura, who was standing still, clutching one of her arms. She was wounded, Sasuke felt alarm shoot through him; seeming unaware that there was danger behind her, shouted out to her for a second time that evening.

"Sakura! Behind!"

She whirled on the spot, but she was moving too slowly. His concern amplified as he saw the Sound Ninja raise his arm, a device attached to his armguards, and he was aiming at Sakura with it. He knew that object, something on his mind flickered as he tried to remember what it was—whatever it was, he remembered it was bad.

"Sakura-chan!" Naruto hollered in concern as the ninja bore down on her.

Her face was grim with resolve, she thought she could take him, she thought she could kill him; Sasuke realized with horror. She didn't realize the danger she was in, the attack unleashed from that object could be potentially fatal. Without realizing he was moving, he launched himself from the tree's branch, he knew that he was quick, but even with his speed he knew he could not outrun the sound that would likely emit from that machine, but he had to try.

He reached out to Sakura the instant his feet touched the ground, gathering her up in his arms; he felt the pulse of the sound near him, but it had missed him, barely grazing him, but as he saw her with his

senses, horror struck him as he saw she had been partially hit by the blast.

"Sakura-chan!" Naruto shouted with rage, as he lunged towards the final sound ninja.

It was then that a powerful signature erupted from within Naruto, taking over him and engulfing him in an entirely different kind of chakra. Sasuke almost lost his footing as he landed in a nearby tree, more surprise washing over him. It was that same chakra, he decided then, that had come upon him at the Valley of the End, one that had possessed Naruto and tried to keep him from leaving Konoha. That was what Naruto was using now, but where it came from he wasn't sure.

The life of the remaining active sound ninja was snuffed out like a candle that shone weakly in comparison to a bonfire. The last ninja was dead; there were two still alive, but they were incapacitated. As silence fell on the clearing, Sasuke watched as Naruto went to the other two ninja and quickly put an end to their pain. Konoha shinobi did not often kill, but when it was required, they did it with respect and dignity. The inferno that had engulfed Naruto faded away after the last man's signature went out, where it stayed dormant.

There was a pause of silence through the clearing, the rain being the only noise. Grimly Naruto turned towards Sasuke, a bleak expression on his face. "How is Sakura-chan?"

The chakra within her was flickering dormant, and he knew that she was merely unconscious, however that did not tell him the extent of the damage done to her, nor if she was going to be okay. He held her body closer to her as he leapt down from the tree to Naruto's side. He wished that stupid asshole Kabuto hadn't erased his memory, that way he would know exactly what happened to Sakura, unfortunately he had to awaken his own memories, and it had decided to inconveniently draw blanks.

"I don't know," he told Naruto, equally as grim, "But we need to get to shelter, she can't travel like this, as long as she's injured, we shouldn't go anywhere."

"How would you know what to do?" Naruto asked suddenly, "Maybe we shouldn't move her at all, maybe we'll hurt her more."

"I *don't* know what to do," he retorted hotly, "I just know that we can't stay out here in the rain with her injured! She'll have to be carried, that much is obvious, dobe, and I know that if she's jostled a little bit more it won't hurt her any further."

"Fine, teme, but I'm just worried for Sakura-chan!" Naruto retorted, agitation showing on his face.

"And you think I'm not?" he stated coldly, glowering in his general direction.

There was a tense moment, then a sigh, "Gomen, teme... I just... well, I've never seen Sakura-chan injured like this and... I don't like feeling helpless."

"Let's go," Sasuke said resolutely, "Sakura said there was a village not far where we would spend the night. We'll try and make it there before nightfall."

"It is nightfall," Naruto replied, "But we'll still get there as soon as we can."

"Hey! Is anyone going to get me out of this blasted tree?!" their client shouted, still perched precariously on the branch that Sasuke had left him in.

"You go get him," Sasuke told Naruto firmly, beginning to walk down the path.

"Oi, why do I have to get him down?!" Naruto exclaimed indignantly.

"Because I said so, and it'll be faster, so quit wasting time!" Sasuke flared back, picking his footing carefully so he wouldn't slip. That was what he told Naruto, that was why he was to get the client down, not him, but the truth of it was, there was no way in hell that he was going to let go of Sakura, not for a minute.

An hour later the four of them stumbled into a ramshackle inn on the edge of the town Sakura had mentioned earlier that day, completely wet and muddy. There had been only one room left, and Sasuke took it without hesitation, promptly badgering the innkeeper to hurry to lead them to their rooms. He had followed the wispy man so closely that he was at risk of running him down.

Now he was sitting on the edge of a mattress that had been laid out on the floor for Sakura. With the help of Naruto, they took off her rain gear and were relieved to find that Sakura was completely dry, so risk of hypothermia was low. Sasuke had refused to leave her side as Naruto ran around getting blankets and pillows for her, Sasuke barking out orders to his best friend with such a sharp edge that there was no argument.

She had no wounds on her that he could see, but still worry afflicted him as she bent over her unconscious form. Aside from the injury that had caused her to be unable to move her arm, she had no external wounds—he had expertly bandaged the deep gash in her arm to prevent further blood loss. However he did remember that the Sound Village did not need to cause and external damage to hurt—or kill—a person. It was basic knowledge that using sound could damage the bone structure, throw off balance or cause one's heart to burst, if handled correctly.

He was on edge now, his hand grasping hers carefully. He had checked her vital signs, and her breathing and heartbeat were regular—that had been enough for Naruto to figure that she would be alright, but it was not enough for him. Breathing and heart rate could not tell you whether someone's liver was out of whack, or if

their brain had been damaged. He didn't think Sakura had been hit in the head by the sound, but the thing was, he couldn't tell.

While the Tokugawa Manzo had settled himself on the only bed, which sat in the corner of the room, and Naruto was unpacking his things while sitting on a stool, Sasuke was still hovering around Sakura, making sure that she was alright.

"Oi, teme, I don't see why you're so worried about Sakura-chan, her vitals are stable, she's not hurt," Naruto said lazily, straightening up, looking at him. Sasuke wasn't facing him, but rather his back was turned; he could still see the confused look on his face.

"As far as you know," he snapped; Naruto couldn't understand, he had no idea the kinds of weapons Oto used.

"She's not coughing blood," Naruto threw in, hoping that would help ease his mood, which it didn't.

"It doesn't matter if she's coughing blood or not," Sasuke comment dryly, squeezing Sakura's hand ever so slightly in vain hopes she would respond.

Naruto shrugged and unpacked a few more things from his bag. Sasuke ignored him, along with the stares Kumo's damned delegate was giving him. With a trembling hand, he reached out and felt Sakura's forehead with his fingers. He couldn't stop the trembling, but as long as Naruto didn't see him shaking, he didn't care. His hand rested futilely on her forehead for a moment before he brushed her hair away from her face instead—he had never been able to tell a fever from touch alone, despite his heightened senses, so he couldn't tell if anything was off. As his fingers traced her hairline, each strand falling away from her face as he did so, he allowed dark reprimanding thoughts to invade his mind. This was what happened, he noted grimly in response to the question that had flashed across his mind in both his dream and the fight—this was what happened when you couldn't protect everyone. This was exactly what happened.

He knew Sakura would have wanted him to protect the delegate though, she would have wanted him to save the life of that bastard, for Konoha's politics, for the greater good. He thought he could understand that, a long time ago. He had left Konoha for the greater good, and now look what it had cost him. His act in saving the client for Konoha had cost Sakura; she could be dying for all he knew, and neither he nor the greater good could do anything about it.

"Daijoubu, Sasuke?" Naruto asked, causing him to jump in surprise. He had forgotten that Naruto was even there.

He let out a menacing growl, "What are you talking about?"

Did it look like he was okay? He was perfectly fine! He should be worrying about Sakura, not him. *He* was okay; Sakura was not.

"I've never seen you so worried before," Naruto replied offhandedly, "Geez, teme, you don't need to get all defensive."

"Yeah, kid," came the dratted voice of the hated Tokugawa Manzo, who seemed to think now would be a good time to open his stupid mouth and throw in a snide comment, "You seem pretty close to the rosette, I'm not buying that there's nothing between you."

Nothing between the two of them? Of course there was something between them, but not in the nature that the other two occupants of the room thought. Fine, he was admitting it, he did care about what happened to Sakura, she was a close friend to him, she was there for him in his darkest hours. One could not live in the same house and have the same unique relationship that he and Sakura had without developing some caring for one another. Sakura had done more than he had asked of any friend, and he was not about to sit around as if nothing was wrong with her.

Behind him he saw Tokugawa raise his hand at Naruto, said hand was clenched in a fist save for the pinky finger. Neither of them could tell that he could sense them both with his chakra, so neither knew that he saw the gesture. Naruto gave a helpless shrug in response; it

seemed that even his best friend didn't know what to think anymore. Sasuke scowled to himself, but did not comment on their behaviour. There was nothing between him and Sakura, and as long as he and Sakura knew that, nothing else mattered.

Trying not to be frustrated with Naruto, he reminded himself that if he could actually comprehend the extent to which Sakura could be injured, the loud-mouthed teen would probably be fretting to the point of hysterics.

Sakura's chakra suddenly flickered a little to life, "...Sasuke...?"

Her utterance was faint, but he heard it nonetheless and was grasping her hand tighter than before. He touched her face to let her know he was there, and her eyes fluttered open. Her expression looked phased, but he could not tell if her eyes held the same light. He knew from past experience that the eyes was the best place to read emotion in, and ever since his blindness he found that unless her chakra was off, he couldn't tell if anything was the matter with her emotionally.

"How are you feeling?" he demanded immediately, and she blinked on confusion, most likely surprised by the urgency in his voice.

"...Sore," she replied, the strength returning to her voice with each word spoken. Naruto had gotten up and was now crossing the room to her side. He knelt down next to Sasuke and looked down at her too, nudging Sasuke's hand off of hers and taking it from him.

"Sore where?" he asked, his voice pressing. He ignored the fact that Naruto had stolen her hand from his—more important things were going on.

She blinked again and then moved her free hand so that lay on her thigh, "There especially."

"How badly?" he insisted, getting up and walking around her so that he was by the leg that was injured.

"Well, it's not broken," she said as a smile flickered across her face, but then a serious look came across her face, and she turned to look at him, "Why? What's wrong?"

Sasuke was silent for a moment; the client was in the room, and he wasn't sure how to reveal this without revealing his previous affiliation with Otogakure. Tokugawa had already made it clear to them that he did not trust them very much, and to reveal that one of the people who was guarding him had previously been working for those who wanted to capture him, would not help matters in the least.

"You know those people were from Sound," Sasuke said cautiously, "By the name of the village it's easy to scope what they would use in a fight—sound. Their jutsus use sound, their weapons use sound, and they use sound to gain information. The attack on you was sound based, and I know that could be potentially fatal. If they used a frequency that would match your bone structure, they could shatter them in an instant."

Sakura gave a serious nod and slowly she began to try and sit up. Sasuke wished he could see her colouration, to see whether she was pale or not. The arm she was using to support herself wobbled a little, and suddenly it gave underneath her; both Naruto and Sasuke reached to catch her, but it was Sasuke who caught her. He helped her sit up and she rubbed her leg slightly; he could sense the green chakra probing her limb for injuries.

"Ugh, I feel so dizzy, maybe I got hit more than I thought I did," she said, mustering a weak smile.

"If your leg is sore, that's where the highest concentration of sound hit," he told her, before turning his head to Naruto to indicate he was speaking to the fox-faced boy, "Get her some water, dobe."

Naruto quickly ran over to her backpack and procured her water bottle; he scampered quickly over to her side again, unscrewing the

cap and offering it to her eagerly. She took it and drank feebly as he continued.

"Residual vibrations most likely traveled along your skeleton and did something to your ears—you know the sub-sense, balance," Sakura nodded and smiled fragily at him.

"The cochlea, yeah, I know, okay well, in which case it should wear off in a while, right?" she asked, handing the canteen back to Naruto, "Thank you for saving me, Sasuke, I'd forgotten that mere sound could kill me. He probably would have if you hadn't gotten me out of the way."

"It still hit you," he told her; he was still berating himself for not being able to clear her of the attack.

"But I'm still alive, and that's what matters," she replied, she turned to her leg and lay both her hands on top of it, and soon the concentrated chakra hung around her hands like an aura to Sasuke, hiding them from his view, "What do you think he was aiming for?"

"Most likely your ribcage," he replied quietly, so that Tokugawa wouldn't know the extent of his knowledge on sound attacks, "It starts vibrating at its natural frequency of six hertz."

She nodded and shuddered in his arms. He, too, didn't like thinking of the consequences of what would have happened had he not intervened. If the sound had been concentrated to a point where it almost defied physics, it would have shattered her ribcage in one hit. Luckily for her, the leg did not have the same natural frequency as the ribcage. A shiver ran down his spine at the thought of a shattered ribcage.

"My interest," piped up the delegate, clearly more about his well being than Sakura, "is how you know so much about the Sound Village, Uchiha Sasuke."

"He worked as a spy for Konoha in Oto for a time," Sakura answered for him, coming up with a lie faster than Sasuke could even think of, "His expertise on the area would be useful; that is part of the reason we were picked for this mission."

Of course that wasn't true, but he seemed to buy it—for the moment.

"So, that only leaves one thing left, you bastard," Naruto said, getting to his feet; Sasuke could sense the beginnings of the powerful chakra inside his teammate beginning to flicker from deep within him, "Why the hell are you being chased by Sound Ninja, and why the hell didn't you tell us?"

All eyes, and in Sasuke's case, his senses, turned to their client; he fidgeted nervously on the spot for a moment and then he met their gaze. A hefty sigh escaped him when he finally spoke.

"Well, I might as well tell you everything," he said resigningly, "Might as well make yourself comfortable."

A/N: Chapter lengths are fluctuating freely now. Everywhere from nineteen pages to ten. They're all over the place :O Lotsa fun to write this arc. Second chapter in and I'm already having fun.

Sorry for the cliffhanger, everyone. You're just going to have to wait another two weeks.

Terminology

Daijoubu - (The romanji spelling may be off on this one.) Are you alright?

Gomen - A more casual way of saying sorry.

Also, I thought I should put a footnote about the "raising of the pinky finger" thing. Raising your pinky finger at someone makes a reference to a "significant other", usually a boyfriend or a girlfriend

(not always though). So when Tokugawa raised his pinky at Naruto, he was basically asking if Sasuke and Sakura were actually together, despite their claims.

Chapter 29

A/N: Good things come to those who wait. Those who waited for two weeks with a cliffhanger (and survived), kudos to you! XD

Chapter Twenty-Nine: In the Lion's Den

"It all started with the beginning of the Chuunin Exams last July. Every time the exams are held, that is when the plans for the next holding is made, because everyone is already conveniently convened," Tokugawa Manzo spoke wearily to the Team Seven, his voice sounding like it carried a million worries.

Sakura herself listened as intently as she could, except there were two distractions she had given Inner Sakura the task of ignoring. First was the continuous ringing in her ears that was the result of the attack she had received earlier that day, and the second was that Sasuke was supporting her carefully in his arms. The latter was about a hundred times more distracting than the former, yet somehow miraculously she was managing to listen to every word.

"It was in the Land of Wind that everyone was gathered together, discussing where the next exam should be held. It is a great honor for a village to be chosen to hold the Chuunin Exams, and while every village gets a turn, it isn't done on rotation. There was quite a heated debate, and after much deliberation, it was decided that the Chuunin Exam would be held in Konoha this coming January," Tokugawa continued, "Most of the debate was caused by Raikage-sama, who had continually insisted that it was Kumogakure's turn to host the exam and that Konoha had hosted the Exam more often than any other village. However a collective vote decided otherwise.

"While hosting the Chuunin Exam is an honor, the real reason that Raikage-sama was so insistent upon the Chuunin Exam being held

in Kumo was because of the Sound village. Recently, Oto has been attacking villages on the edge of The Land of Lightning and leaving no one behind. There have been many clans with good kekkai genkai in their blood who have all vanished into thin air. There are few survivors and those who do survive, are left torn by the trauma."

Sakura felt Sasuke stiffen and the grasp on her shoulders grew tighter. When Tokugawa wasn't paying attention to them, she surreptitiously laid a reassuring hand on top of his. Sasuke of all people would understand what the survivors of those clans were going through.

"These attacks would occur irregularly and without warning, like they were taking people captive whenever they needed them, or whatever they needed them for," Tokugawa continued, not having noticed, "Often Kumo's shinobi would arrive too late to save anyone, and there was little we could do otherwise. In a desperate attempt to save some of the few remaining villages on the border, the Raikage made a plea to the Otokage, offering to make a deal with them. They asked that the raids on the Land of Lightning's bordering towns in exchange for anything—within reason."

"I have a question," Sakura spoke up suddenly, "Why is Kumo negotiating the peace treaty? Don't the lands belong to the Feudal Lords?"

"In the Lightning Country, we do things a little differently than the Land of Fire," Tokugawa replied, "We do not concentrate all our shinobi into one village, but rather they are dispersed across the land in little pockets, doing their share in defending the land's borders. This benefits both the shinobi and feudal lords alike; the largest of the villages is where the Chuunin Exam would be held, and it becomes a sort of focal point for all of Kumo's shinobi. Anyways, most of the villages that have been attacked are shinobi villages, and Kumo is in charge of those villages. The Feudal Lords deal with their own, and Kumo deals with her own."

Sakura gave a nod and indicated for him to continue.

"So, an exchange was suggested. The terms that Oto gave us were very simple, yet difficult at the same time. We were asked to get the Chuunin Exams to be held in Kumogakure, and they would leave the border towns alone. The reasoning behind this was so that shinobi from Sound would be allowed to participate in the Chuunin Exams, having been banned from attending them after an attack in Konoha about four years ago," Tokugawa said with an air that suggested that his story was drawing to a close, "Why they wanted to participate in the Chuunin Exams was not our concern. We figured it was a way to redeem themselves and hopefully own a seat at the Exam Council again. And that is how things are."

"That doesn't tell us why the hell they're after you," Naruto spat, and Sakura cast him a warning glance. The circumstances hadn't changed, they were still to get this delegate to Kumo safely, even if it meant there was a posse of Sound ninja on their tail, "And you still didn't explain why the hell you would even consider dealing with a village whose leader is a criminal traitor from Konoha."

"I'll explain the second point first," Tokugawa said patiently, being the politest they'd seen him since they started the mission, "Our villages were being attacked and we were trying to find the most diplomatic way out of the situation."

"By putting the other villages at risk?" Naruto demanded, "You could have asked another village to help you with the problem instead of making deals with a criminal!"

"Raikage-sama's pride is his flaw, and unfortunately he was too proud to ask help of other villages," Tokugawa replied with dignity, "Kumo is a prideful village as well, and we do not want the other villages thinking that we cannot handle problems as trivial as attacked villages."

Naruto was seething, but Sakura laid her free hand on his arm long enough to remind him to remain calm, "And they're after you, why?"

Tokugawa sighed again, "Again, I'm not sure why. Revenge perhaps? Or maybe I could be used as blackmail, or held for ransom. I am an influential man in Kumo, and I can think of a number of reasons why they would want me, but none of them are completely sound. If I were to hazard a guess, the most likely reason would for—"

"—a warning," Sasuke finished for him, "That is their way. They would have you be a warning to the Raikage. Oto does not forgive easily."

Sasuke would know that better than anyone, Sakura noted with a shiver down her spine. Her mind could still recall vividly the marks of torture he had on his skin when he had been brought to hospital; burns, cuts and broken arm. Orochimaru was cruel when he was betrayed.

"In any case," Sakura cut into the silence that had followed, "We have to get you back within Kumo's walls safely, and ward off any trouble that may come our way. Right now I think we're all in need of some rest, here will do nicely for the night. ...Wherever 'here' is."

"Remember that small town you were talking about?" Naruto informed her, getting to his feet.

"Ah, good," she nodded approvingly, "Thank you everyone for being so concerned about me."

"I knew you'd be fine, Sakura-chan" Naruto told her with a grin on his face, "You're tough stuff and I know it." At this comment he rubbed his jaw, as if recalling thoughtfully a moment in time when she had hit him, which moment it was, she wasn't sure, "But you should have seen Sasuke. He wouldn't let go of you at all! Carried you all the way here and practically ran the innkeeper down while trying to get to the room fast enough."

Sakura found her face going slightly red, "Thank you, Sasuke. I suppose you were the only one who knew how bad it could have

turned out."

"Aa," he replied his face slipping into an emotionless mask. She knew he was blanking his expression because Naruto was making a fuss over his concern for her, so she didn't really mind. Actions speak louder than words; if he really had carried her all the way without letting go of her once, then he was practically shouting. "How are you feeling?"

"My ears are ringing, but my leg's all better. I just need a good night's sleep," she replied; he gave a nod and dropped his arms away from her once he knew she could sit up on her own, "Everyone should try and get a good night's sleep, but be alert, we don't know who saw us come here."

There was a collective nod from the other inhabitants in the room, as they all scrambled to get their things together. There was only one bed in the room and of course the delegate had claimed it; despite his confession of Kumo's doings to them, that didn't make his personality any different than before. Too tired to even think, Sakura lay down on the mattress, the pillow she had seeming so soft to her when she felt so stiff and sore. She barely noticed as the guys set up their mattresses, one on either side of where she was lying.

When everything was settled down and the lights had been turned off, Sakura reached out with both her hands, taking one of Naruto's and one of Sasuke's. She gave them both a squeeze and a smile came to her lips.

"Thank you, you two," she murmured sleepily, "Sleep well."

Her smile graced her lips a little longer when she felt a return squeeze from both the boys, almost at the exact same time. She was so lucky, she thought to herself sleepily as she drifted off, to have the two best teammates in the world, people who would always come like knights in shining armor to help her.

It was early in the morning when Sasuke woke, and the only reason he knew this was because nobody else was awake yet, everyone was still deep in slumber. This was a good thing too, because somehow in the middle of the night, Sakura had rolled on her side, towards him, and out of habit, he in turn had held her close to him. Carefully he detangled himself from her grasp so that he would not wake her, and sat for a moment absorbing the information he was receiving on his surroundings. Aside from the fact that the clock on the wall, which thankfully had no cover or exterior protection for the hands to speak of, that told him that it was five in the morning, there was nothing in the room worth mentioning.

His attention next went to the client, who was laying the room's only bed, snoring quietly and rhythmically—he seemed perfectly fine and without ailment from yesterday's scuffle. After the revelation he had imparted upon the team, Sasuke had found a number of things that he needed to speak to Sakura about in private. Their client would definitely stop believing the cover story about him being a spy if he overheard the things he was going to discuss. After deciding that Tokugawa was in no way harmed, his attention turned to Naruto.

Naruto was contorted across his mattress in the strangest position imaginable, snoring blissfully away. Sasuke sat for a moment, recalling their fight yesterday and the sudden surge of chakra that had come forth when Naruto had realized Sakura was injured. Where before jealousy and frustration would have plagued him, annoying questions filled Sasuke's mind.

He had seen that power before, but where did it come from? How had Naruto attained it? It was obvious now that the source of power was fueling Naruto's sudden jumps in ability, but how long had it been manifesting in him? Of what nature was that power? He didn't understand, and it bothered him to no end. He cut off his chakra senses and unwillingly allowed his mind to wander back to the Valley of the End, the time that power had been shown the clearest. The strange whisker-like marks on Naruto's face had darkened, he recalled, and his blue eyes had become red like the Sharingan, the

pupils slit. A visible aura of chakra had surrounded him, and a tail-like structure and some sort of ears had been visible. A feral, animal sort of nature had possessed Naruto then, and the form—it reminded him of...a fox.

He allowed his senses to pick up again, but he instead focused only on Naruto; such power in such a short time. How had the boy he'd known as the lousiest ninja in Konoha grown so strong? Was there some way that possibly he too could obtain that very same power...?

Sasuke violently jerked his thoughts away from the very concept. He could not think that way; he *would* not think that way. It was thinking like that that had gotten him in this position in the first place. It was thinking like that that has landed everyone else in trouble. He had left Konoha to try and protect people, but they ended up getting hurt by trying to get him back. Everyone had been hurt when he left, instead of being protected. He had almost killed Naruto. He had almost killed his best friend. As for Sakura...

He shifted the projection of the chakra so that it focused instead on Sakura, her deceptively fragile form deep within the dreams of slumber. He was glad that he had never hurt her in the same nature that he had hurt Naruto, but...

...I don't know if you've heard, but after you left Konoha, Sakura fell into depression...

...he had caused her pain of a different kind.

Suppressing a hefty sigh, Sasuke shoved his blanket aside and sat up. His senses lingered a moment longer on Sakura; there was so much he needed to talk to her about, but he would never dream of waking her, especially after what she had survived yesterday. Instead he took his currently idle blanket and put it over top of hers. It was cold in the room, and even though he didn't know if it would have any affect on how fast she recovered, it seemed like an appropriate thing to do.

He got to his feet and expanded his senses so it covered the full three hundred sixty degrees. He could sense people all around him in the small building, the presences of other guests in the vicinity, above them and around them in the small two-story inn. There only about four other people awake at this our, one being the innkeeper from yesterday; aside from that, all was still. Any matters that he wished to discuss with Sakura could wait until she woke up, until then, he would wander around the town restocking on supplies for the rest of their journey. With that decision in mind, he left the room as quietly as he could.

It was damp outside when Sasuke stepped out of the small inn, closing the door firmly behind him. The rain from yesterday had stopped, so he hadn't put on his poncho, as it wasn't needed. It was a little chilly, but he didn't mind that so much, it was the dampness that irritated him the most. The moisture seemed to be sucked into his clothing and pressed up against him in the air; he felt compressed in the damp, like a dwindling flame on a piece of wet wood—and he felt moldy. Judging by the damp alone, he was certain that the blackness that was the sky above was overcast and grey.

He walked down the well worn road, passing houses and the like, making his way to what signs told him was the market place. He was mildly surprised when he came across the first signpost, the words clear to him; each marker had been made out of the wood, and the letters carved into them provided a three-dimensional surface in which he could 'read'.

The market was open air and there weren't that many people. Most of the shopkeepers were setting up, and because this was a small town, there weren't that many shops to speak of. He wandered by one stand that sold food and stopped to examine the merchandise. It was then that he got an indication that something was off. The shopkeeper was nervous around him, answering his questions on the food with a slight stutter and a jumpy temperament. He would have passed off the shopkeeper as just a nervous person, if he

hadn't begun to receive a nervous greeting from most of the shopkeepers.

He was walking up to another stand when he received a smile from the man behind the counter—but it was not a friendly smile, but rather a wry smirk, flashed to him in greeting. The man was rather plain in appearance, but his body was big and burly. With his feet up on the counter and a toothpick hanging from his mouth, he looked like a regular thug.

"Well, well, well," the shopkeeper said, "Out doing dirty work again? Or are ya here just to give us a warning, like last time?"

Sasuke frowned slightly at the man's statement, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Huh, well, I must've caught ya in a good mood," the man said amusedly, "You ain't gonna hit me? Ya know they won't like that, they think you're getting soft."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, old man, and frankly I don't care to find out," Sasuke said evenly, a threat slipping into his voice, "If you want me to buy anything then I suggest you treat your customers better."

"Well, will ya look at that!" the shopkeeper called out to the other shopkeepers of nearby stands, "He's a customer now?"

The man let out a bitter laugh and the other shopkeepers were shooting nervous glances at the two of them. Sasuke on the other hand had no idea what was going on; he honestly had no idea what the man was talking about.

"Why bother paying? Your thugs didn't care to pay, just stole it all last time," the man growled, taking his feet off the counter and sitting upright so that he was looking directly at Sasuke, "In fact, I should make you pay right here, right now for all the stuff I lost money on last time."

Sasuke shot him a glare and turned away from the stand, walking away. Whatever was going on, he wanted no part in it, and he was not going to stick around to listen to the shopkeeper's ranting. Behind him he sensed that the shopkeeper was reaching under the counter, and after a minute he saw a knife being withdrawn. Sasuke knew what the man was going to do before he did it—why he was throwing the knife at him was beyond his comprehension, but he turned just as the man let go of the handle. Snatching it neatly out of the air, Sasuke glowered angrily at the man, who now looked not only shocked but also fearful. Throwing the knife back, he let it hit embed itself into the wood of the stand between the man's hands on the counter—he didn't want to start trouble, but it left a clear message. Turning away he took his purchases and was going to leave the market when a woman ran out to him.

"Please, please, sir," she said, her voice trembling and terror marring her face, "don't take his words harshly, he doesn't know his place. Please don't tell Orochimaru to kill us."

Sasuke was now stunned instead of confused. Tell Orochimaru not to kill them? He felt like someone had hit him in the stomach as something in his mind clicked.

"Why are we here?" Sasuke demanded coldly to the white-haired medic nin who was crouched low in the trees next to him.

Having being dragged away from Oto's main stronghold at the crack of dawn, Sasuke did not appreciate being taken places without being told their purpose for being there. Kabuto had been purposely mum on where they were going in addition to their purpose of their journey.

"There are some good resources in the village ahead," Kabuto's silky voice melded with the wind's breeze perfectly as he crouched in the foliage of the trees outside town, "This town isn't that big, but we do rely on it heavily for it's food supply. Orochimaru has had some influence over the area for a while now, but the shipments have stopped recently."

"Get to the point," Sasuke spat bitterly, the wind blowing around them, chilling him slightly.

"You're to deliver a warning to these people," Kabuto replied, shooting him a warning glance, which Sasuke ignored, "Of course you won't be going yourself, that's what the others are for."

Sasuke cut off his chakra senses for a split second to clear his head of the voices of Kabuto. Another flashback? Except not in a dream—this time he remembered while he was conscious. Did that mean that they were coming back at a quicker rate?

"Sir?" the woman spoke up timidly from beside him, and he turned his head towards the sound, his chakra senses still deactivated. There was a squeak and the sound of someone falling to the ground; concernedly he activated the senses hurriedly in order to find out what had happened. The woman was down on her hands and knees before him, her bow so low that her face seemed to almost be touching the ground. His silence must have caused her to think that he was displeased and she had been frightened; she was shaking, he noted.

"I won't," Sasuke told her before walking away, leaving the woman kneeling on the ground.

Striding down the street at a brisk pace, Sasuke found himself examining each building, each structure, each cobblestone with care, trying his best to remember. Where exactly were they? His mind was racing; there was a touch of familiarity about everything around him, yet he couldn't grasp exactly what it was like. Sitting down beneath a tree off the path, he took a moment to think things over.

Give the villagers a warning? He couldn't remember what happened after he had had that conversation with Kabuto, but judging from the villagers, the point had definitely been made. Worst of all, he didn't remember what kind of warning they had been given. Obviously the Sound nin that apparently had been with him at the time had stolen

from the villagers, if not more. Sasuke growled at himself; there were so many things in his past that he wished he could just erase, or change.

The dream that he had a couple days ago, it definitely been a flashback, now he needed to remember what Kabuto had said. Something about...outposts... Oto had outposts everywhere, he remembered now. The outposts were villages that had either been threatened into or bought into Oto's influence; they were to supply Oto with supplies for the ninja working there. Food, weapons, medicines...

A cold thought flooded him, and he began to pay close attention to the chakra signatures in the vicinity. People were walking about, not paying attention to him, but there were three signatures that were stationary, and two were in the most suspicious of places. One on a street corner and one on a roof—the third was just idling by a signpost.

As inconspicuously as he could, Sasuke got to his feet, and wandered down the path, and when the signature on the roof and the signature around the corner began to move to follow him, he knew for sure that he was being followed. He turned a sharp corner and began to run, making his way back to the inn as quickly as possible. He, Naruto and Sakura had to grab the delegate and get out of there; it would be better if they didn't have to fight again.

It started to rain; just perfect, he noted sarcastically, as the signatures suddenly sped up, realizing that their quarry was escaping. He really didn't want to fight, but he didn't want to be followed to the inn. He needed to do something to throw them off. But throw them off how? It was early in the morning and there were hardly any people about to cause a distraction; the rain wasn't helping matters, because people would stay indoors because of the weather.

He could confront them, he thought with grim humor—he supposed that could be a likely course of action, but he really doubted that that

would be ideal. He doubted whether any of the lower downs would be informed if Orochimaru's container suddenly decided to render himself useless, but they would most likely pick up on the fact that he was blind. While none of the people in the market had said anything, he knew that they most likely would have noticed his state. Posing as being here on business was a possible option, but he doubted whether the Sound ninja would buy it. And of course, there was the last option, which seemed the most practical at the moment: he could hide.

Scanning the area wildly, he spotted the engraved sign of a bar and slowing his pace he opened the door and entered. The room was rather small and there was nothing extravagant in the way of decoration. Aside from the barkeep behind the counter and a few drunks left over from the previous night, there was no one there. Said barkeeper looked up upon Sasuke's entrance and warily, Sasuke walked up to the counter, sitting down on a stool, while paying close attention to the signatures that had been following him.

"Ah, Sasuke-san," the barkeeper said in a low voice, even though all other occupants of the room were passed out, "Haven't seen your face here in a while."

Sasuke repressed his startled jump from being addressed and gave an even nod in return. He turned his face towards the barkeeper and tried to move his eyes so that they would be positioned to line up with his. He had no idea if he was succeeding though. How many people here were Orochimaru's eyes and ears? How important of an outpost was this place?

"What brings you out here to Nouseon?" the barkeep continued conversationally, while washing a glass, "Orochimaru hasn't taken interest in here for a while."

Another icy sensation ran down Sasuke's spine that day. Nouseon, that was the village that Orochimaru had rice shipped in from. Not only was this place extremely important, he remembered, but it was

also possibly the biggest stronghold of Oto's spies and ninja that lay outside the Land of Sound. This was not good.

"Can I get you a drink?"

There were no words to describe the extent of how annoying it was to have one's memory erased. Not only had he realized that the team was in a potentially dangerous place, but he had realized too late. They were already within the lion's den, and one wrong step and they could have all of Oto on them in a couple days. He would do his best to keep up the façade and then leave as soon as it was safe to go outside again. The two signatures were looking around outside, but coming nowhere near him.

"Aa," he replied evenly to the offer of a drink, "Just water today, I need my wits about me."

There was a bemused expression on the man's face, but he complied, procuring a glass of water for him nonetheless. Sasuke took a sip from it, sniffing it subtly before he actually allowed the liquid into his mouth—anyone he had associated while he was within Orochimaru's ranks could not be trusted.

He set the glass down on the counter and pretended to stare at the surface to avoid having to attempt 'looking' the barkeep in the eye, "Actually, this time my business is personal. Orochimaru does not know that I am here, and neither is he to know."

It was not uncommon for Sasuke to be allowed time on his own to do whatever he wished, and sometimes he would go out for days at a time. Nobody questioned him, because few had rank above him; also those who would question his motives were threatened back into place or easily silenced. There was enough threat in the statement he had given the barkeeper to know that he most likely would not be questioned further on the matter.

"Well, if you need any help, you know that my boys will be there to back you up," the barkeep replied, and then added in a more hushed

tone, "People have wanted Orochimaru's hands out of the village for a while now and if you need a hand with anything... Well, we'll be there."

Sasuke couldn't care less if this village was to rebel against Orochimaru, but he couldn't risk word of his return getting around. He didn't want the name Uchiha Sasuke floating around when the villagers were liberated. It had been in his original plan to liberate all under Orochimaru's oppression—once he had overthrown the Sannin, he would liberate all who had suffered under him, letting all know that Uchiha Sasuke had saved them. But things had worked out that way, instead he found himself regrettably having to speak in Orochimaru's defense.

"Are you suggesting that I am planning on overthrowing Orochimaru?" he uttered in a deadly voice, his point clear.

"Oh, no, no, no," the barkeep fumbled with his words, "I wasn't suggesting—"

Sasuke stood up, and again attempted to match his sightless eyes with the cowering man before him. The chakra signatures outside had left the area, and now would be the best time to leave.

"If I ever hear so much of a whisper against Orochimaru again, I will make certain that those whispers are silenced," he said with a final word; he quickly crossed the room, past some snoring drunks and slammed the door behind him.

Once outside, Sasuke analyzed each signature in the area carefully before making his way to the inn as quickly as he was capable.

Sakura was barely awake when all of a sudden the door to the room flew open with a loud bang. Sitting bolt upright, she lunged for a kunai and faced the room's intruder. A soaking wet Sasuke stood in the doorway, an urgent expression on his face. Dropping the hand that held the kunai posed, she stared at him with surprise. Even

though she had lunged for a weapon and was now staring at him in disbelief, he paid her little heed as he strode over to Naruto's sleeping form. With a quick swing of the foot he gave Naruto a swift kick in the ribs, impatience printed clearly on his face.

"Get up, now, dobe!" he ordered as Naruto yelped, but Sasuke was proceeding over to the bed before he could make sure that Naruto was awake.

Seizing the mattress's edge, he yanked it up hard so that Tokugawa Manzo came rolling off, covers and all, landing with a loud thump on the floor. The politician gave a shout when he hit the floor and sat sprawled there for a minute, seeming dazed at being woken so suddenly.

"Sakura, we all need to get out of here," Sasuke said, walking over to his bedroll, rolling it up as quickly as it seemed he could.

"What the hell, teme?!" Naruto shouted, rubbing his ribs where he had been kicked, "What do you mean we have to leave?!"

"I meant what I said, now pack your things, quickly," Sasuke told him fiercely before turning to Tokugawa who had just opened his mouth, "And you, no complaining, if you want to live to see your family again you'll pack your things without so much of a stupid complaint out of you."

Sakura sat and beheld all this with a stunned silence. Nobody had moved in the room, and both Naruto and Tokugawa were both looking at Sasuke like he had gone crazy. He was already done with his bedroll and was now putting things in his backpack. It was then that she noticed the bag of supplies that was sitting next to him. He had been out restocking, she assumed, had something happened?

"Sasuke—" she was cut off as she was suddenly required to catch a package of food that Sasuke had tossed to her, "Sasuke, what— what on earth is going on?"

Pausing in his packing, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he released the breath, his voice was calm, but she could tell the agitation was still present; this had to be the most worried she'd ever seen him.

"We're right in the heart of one of Oto's strongholds," he said so quietly that nobody would have heard if it hadn't been dead silent in the room, "And they're already looking for us."

A/N: Bwahaha! Cliffhanger ending, sorta. XD This chapter kinda highlights the fact that Sasuke's wiped memory can be very annoying, and in this case, dangerous. Tokugawa is going to be more of a bastard, I promise. I'm not sure whether he or Sakura's father is the bigger bastard right now. Haha :p

Side note: My editor didn't know what it meant to be "mum" about something meant, so she requested that I put a little footnote explaining for others who don't understand. To be mum about something, simply put, is to be silent about something, refusing to elaborate further, etc. I hope nobody was too confused about the term, and I hope none of you got the mental image of Kabuto running a daycare, like my editor did. :p

Chapter 30

A/N: Bah! Naruto Manga chapter 371 totally screwed up the last part of the chapter. It took me forever to think of a way to rewrite it and compensate for the new information that came out. (growls with frustration)

Chapter Thirty: Confessions, Mistakes, and Deceptions

That one simple sentence was enough for her, "Everyone, pack—now. Forget getting a change of clothes, what you were wearing yesterday is still good. We need to leave."

There was a mass scramble in the room afterwards as everyone made a mad dash to pack their things. Sakura cast a glance at Sasuke who was now tying the scratched Konoha headband over his forehead; whatever had happened to him this morning, it was not good. Obviously he hadn't been caught or found, as he hadn't brought an entire battalion of Sound Ninja in on his heels, but they were still being looked for.

Within fifteen minutes they left the room and after paying the innkeeper the money, they exited the building on Sasuke's okay. She listened to him when he advised that they double back around to the village entrance rather than cutting through, they would draw less attention and would most likely go unnoticed by through trees.

The formation she ordered them to follow was simple. Sasuke in front to warn them of any approaching enemies, while Naruto was behind him, ready to back him up in the event that they were attacked. Next was Tokugawa, who was having much difficulty leaping through the trees—being a politician, he didn't do much strenuous activity, and the exercise was quite laborious for him. That

was why Sakura was bringing up the rear, to make sure that he didn't fall far behind.

They traveled off the main road for the morning, going into hiding whenever they met someone. It was so strange that the past few days passed without so much of an encounter with anyone, and now there were so many people. They had passed five different groups of people so far that morning, ranging from solos to groups of four. So far, nobody seemed to fit the profile of Sound Ninja, but they hid in the brush regardless.

"Oi...could we...stop...with the...tree...hopping?" Tokugawa Manzo huffed around noon, "We've been...at it...for...hours!"

"Stop you guys!" Sakura called ahead, "Tokugawa-san needs a rest."

"And I'm hungry!" he moaned loudly, landing down on the ground and flopping beneath a tree, "Let's stop."

Sakura looked up at Sasuke, "Do you figure it's safe enough?"

"There's no one nearby," he replied simply.

"Okay then, I guess we can stop for lunch now," she stated, jumping down and landing next to Tokugawa.

"Yay! Ramen time!" Naruto exclaimed exuberantly, leaping down from the tree and pulling off his backpack, quickly procuring a cup of instant ramen.

"Don't start a fire, Naruto, we don't want to be here any longer than we have to, it's best that we keep moving for the rest of the day," she told him off lightly and then she turned her gaze back up to the tree where Sasuke hadn't moved, "Sasuke? Is everything okay?"

"Aa," he replied, but a few more seconds passed before he allowed himself to jump down to the ground.

"So much has happened since yesterday," she commented lightly looking over to where he was standing, "What on earth happened? I thought you didn't sense anyone near us while we were traveling."

"I didn't," he replied sitting crossed legged on the ground, his fingers laced together beneath his nose, "I wasn't expecting anyone from Oto to be going out of their way to give us trouble though."

"Meaning?" growled Tokugawa, who was now munching on a non-perishable snack mix.

"Oto's shinobi have equipment and genetic alterations that give them better hearing. Most likely they knew of our traveling through the area, and were monitoring our movements early on," Sasuke replied shortly, "Their hearing distances probably surpasses the range which I can detect their presences."

"How do you do that, anyway?" Naruto asked, his mouth full of uncooked ramen noodles, "I still don't get how you can see even though...you can't."

"That's not important now, Naruto," Sakura interjected, "When we get back to Konoha, Sasuke can explain it to you, but not right now. There are some things that I'm going to need to ask you Sasuke, I know your knowledge on Oto is limited, but can you please explain how you came to the revelation that we were in one of Orochimaru's strongholds."

Sakura listened closely as Sasuke recounted the shopkeeper's confrontation with him in the market, being followed and running into the barkeeper while he was hiding.

"Parts of my memory are coming back, and I don't like the feel of this whole area," he told her darkly, "There's something wrong about this place, and I know that the longer we stay here, the more at risk we're at. Those who attacked us yesterday, those were Oto's equivalent of chuunin; when they don't come back, they'll be sending jounin, and I

know for certain that there is a chance that a jounin will recognize me."

Sakura gave a nod, her mind calculating; she turned to Tokugawa, "Would we be safe within Rai's border?"

He gave a shrug, "The Raikage didn't hold up his end of the bargain—the chuunin exams are being held in Konoha. We'll be saf er but we won't be completely safe until we reach Kumogakure."

"Okay, we just need to get you there then, we should be fine on the return trip because we have no quarrel with Sound—or at least not directly," she looked over at Sasuke as she spoke, the said Uchiha had a troubled look on his face.

"It doesn't make sense to me why they would want the Chuunin exams to be held in Kumo," he said after a moment, his brow dark with a frown, "They were going to attack Konoha, it would be more to their advantage that the Chuunin Exams were held there."

" *What ?!*" Naruto spluttered, bits of ramen noodles flying everywhere, "They were going to attack Konoha? When?"

"At the Chuunin Exam," Sasuke stated simply, "But that was about a year ago when they were planning it. I remember now that I had a crucial role in that plot, but complications would have most likely arisen what with me losing my eyesight."

"When did you remember this?" Sakura asked stunned, never hearing anything about a plot to attack Konoha.

"Last night when Tokugawa explained the tension between Sound and Kumo," Sasuke replied lightly.

"Okay, okay, back up a moment," Tokugawa cut in, "The way you're talking makes it sound like Uchiha here was actually working for Oto instead of being a spy. How much did you pretend to be on their side?"

There was an awkward silence as Sakura exchanged glances with Naruto and cast a nervous one in Sasuke's direction. Biting her lip she fumbled for something to say, but was drawing up blanks. Sasuke beat her to speaking.

"I was not a spy," he replied bluntly, "It'll detangle ourselves from the lies we've spun if I tell you right now that I was actually a defector from Konoha of a period of three years."

Sakura gave Sasuke a very surprised look at his openness over his betrayal of Konoha. Naruto was giving him an equally shocked look.

"Are you saying that I am being escorted by an ex-criminal?!" Tokugawa demanded angrily, his politician's face growing red with anger.

"An ex-criminal is someone who isn't a criminal anymore," Sasuke replied evenly and icy undertone in his voice, "You have nothing to fear."

"How do I know that you've truly come back to this side? What if you're a spy from Oto?" Tokugawa shouted, his face growing redder by the moment.

"Do you think that I would have assisted in killing five Sound chuunin if I had truly been on their side?" Sasuke retorted, anger slipping into his voice as well, "It would have been easy to overwhelm you and take you hostage right then."

Tokugawa said nothing to this, but continued to look enraged, "So that explains the scratch mark through your forehead protector! You're a traitor to your village? And the Hokage recommended you on this mission?"

"She wouldn't have sent him if she felt he could not have been trusted!" Sakura threw in angrily, "I was her pupil, and I know she wouldn't have given you less than what you needed for protection."

"The scratch on the forehead protector was from a completely different situation!" Naruto added as well, his fist clenched, "Don't talk about things that you don't know about!"

"And do you think that if I had been going to help Oto in your capture that I would have admitted it to you?" Sasuke said, his voice the iciest, yet the most calm out of the three of them.

Tokugawa seemed to be intimidated by having all three of them gang up on him, so he quickly fell silent, but Sakura noted that his face was still red, and his eyes were filled with mistrust as they looked upon Sasuke. She ignored the impolite man and spoke to Sasuke.

"Actually, I was surprised when you admitted it," she confessed, her eyes studying him closely, "But you must have had a reason for it. Why mention it now of all times?"

"Because, before the plans to attack Konoha were made, there was an attack on Kumo," Sasuke said bluntly, "And pieces of it have been coming back to me throughout the morning. I have a feeling that I'll be recognized."

He didn't have to say anything more for her to realize why he was saying all of this now. If he got Tokugawa to Kumo safely, it would show that he could be trusted, despite any previous harm he may have caused. While the damage could not be undone, it would make him look better and thus cause fewer problems overall.

"I thought I recognized you!" Tokugawa exploded, "You—you were the one who attacked...!"

There was a fire in their client's eyes now, but Sasuke sat still, seeming rather unperturbed by the man's raging appearance.

"I didn't kill anyone," Sasuke said evenly, "People may have perished that night, but I swear to you that nobody died by my hand."

"It doesn't matter! You were involved!" their client snapped in return, "You were the one who attacked *me* ! You commented on my limp? You were the one who gave that to me! I thought you looked familiar, and I began to wonder when you commented on it, but I wasn't certain."

"You were probably in the way, and I was simply getting you out of the way," Sasuke said evenly, and Sakura couldn't believe how he was putting it.

"Of course I was in the way! You and everyone else in Oto were trying to get your hands on our chief clan's kekkei genkai! Of course we wouldn't allow that, seeing as they have long served to counsel Kumo," Tokugawa spat angrily, "Do you realize how much rehabilitation I had to go through in order to walk properly again?"

"I have had my own share of rehabilitation, Tokugawa, and I assure you that I know it is not pleasant," Sasuke said so coldly that the air could have frosted over, "However it is pointless to tell me that I am the one who had committed these crimes against your village, because when I was thrown out of Oto, my memory was erased, and I can't remember most of what I've done for the past three years. Anything that I did while I was under Oto's influence are things that I can't remember, and not proud of. I realize that even though I can't remember what I've done, doesn't make them any less real, but I will not let you hold them against me, because I no longer am a pawn of Oto, and I will not be treated as one."

Tokugawa opened his mouth again to put forth further complaint, but Sakura felt that it was time to intervene, "Look, whatever has happened in the past can't be undone, so we might as well forget about it. Sasuke has sworn to make sure that you get to Kumo and that he is no longer associated with Sound. You've trusted him so far and he's saved your life once already on this journey. I think if you've been safe so far, you can trust him for the rest of this trip."

"Of course you'd stand in his defense," Tokugawa shot, "I don't care what either of you two claim, there's definitely something more going

on between you two!"

That was the final straw, "Tokugawa-san, being a representative of shinobi village, you should know better than that! You know that a mission is the first and foremost important thing, and as long as this mission is still running, no personal feelings will ever come before that. I did not graduate from the Konoha Academy with perfect scores on all shinobi principles only to let anything stand before this mission. Even if there were something between Sasuke and I, I would be forced to jump to save your life instead of his. Don't you forget that we are from Konoha, a village that prides itself in being compiled of some of the best ninja in the world."

There was a stunned silence from Kumo's delegate and after a while he looked away and glowered darkly into the trees.

"Okay, lunch break's over, we've got to keep moving," she announced, getting to her feet, "As soon as we get to Kumo, we'll have to send a message to Tsunade-sama informing her of your recollected memories."

Sasuke gave a mute nod and rose to his feet. Within five minute they were moving again, the silence awkward and the tension thick, no one saying anything to do something about either.

They walked for the rest of the afternoon, their formation dispersing over the day as they drew farther away from the farming town. Sakura seemed to think it was safer now that there had been a sizable distance been put between them and Oto's outpost, but Sasuke didn't think it was as wise. He was again walking without his senses, hanging onto Sakura's arm for guidance, but he was paying acute attention to everything around them, even though he couldn't remember where other outposts were, he wasn't about to risk being put in the middle of another one.

He had confided this to Sakura and she had agreed, they would not stay in any more villages until they crossed the Lightning Country's

border—they would camp until then. She was quick on her feet when it came to dealing with things under the pressure of circumstance and Sasuke was amazed by how quickly she had rerouted their path in her mind so that it avoided as many towns as possible. It wouldn't slow them down much—perhaps an afternoon's worth, she said. Sasuke found himself also stunned by how well she had memorized the map, letting the group know ahead of time whereabouts she wanted to pitch camp.

It was as the day was drawing to a close and the temperature of the air was cooling that Sasuke began to hear running water in the distance, and after another fifteen minutes of walking, Sakura brought them to a halt.

"Okay, we'll be spending the night here, but a little off the path," she announced the group, breaking the lingering silence, "I picked here because there's a river nearby and after our rushed departure this morning, I'm sure we'd all like a chance to wash up."

There was the feeling of collective agreement from everyone present. Sasuke himself was feeling a little grubby, the damp weather from yesterday having caught up to him and allowing himself to feel moldy. That would have to wait until later, once they were all set up for the evening.

"Naruto, will you please help me set up camp?" Sakura said with a pleasant tone, but there was an hint of weariness in her voice, "Sasuke, will you go set up a trap ring around camp and enclose a segment of the river? I think the shift work will be mandatory tonight, but I'd like an extra line of defense. The segment of the river is for the sake of preventing anyone from setting off the traps while trying to access it."

"It would probably be best if we all used minimal chakra during the set up," he told her, letting go of her arm and activating his senses, "Oto's jounin are not going to be easy to deal with."

"Alright," she said, nodding in agreement, "But that goes for you too. Set up the traps quickly, but not sloppily. And don't use any excess chakra that you don't have to use."

Giving a sharp nod, Sasuke took off to into the tress, his senses highly alerted. There would definitely be people on their trail sooner rather than later. They would be jounin level ninja from Oto, and to say that they would be a pain to be rid of would be an understatement. Luckily for them, Sakura had told him that day that this would be the last night before they crossed the border into Rai's territory, which would be safer than the terrain they were currently traveling.

The addition of "er" to the end of the word "safe" was the key in this knowledge. Tokugawa had said that towns near the border had been attacked, and chances were that there was a lot of activity going on there—and not just from the local inhabitants of the Land of Lightning. They would most likely become exponentially safer the closer they came to Kumogakure, and the deeper they traveled into the Lightning Country, the better.

And then of course there was the fact that he had been—most likely heavily—involved with the attack on Kumogakure.

Sasuke leapt from tree to tree, smacking on explosive tags and very subtly-hidden trap lines. The wire was almost invisible to the eye, only noticeable if it caught the light. After Sasuke had gained his chakra "vision" the wires were as opaque as yarn, and he no longer fell into Sakura's traps when she had laid them out. The explosive tags contained trace amounts of chakra and if he concentrated hard enough, he could locate them. Needless to say they put those exercises aside and Sasuke had taken up setting the traps—now assisted by his chakra senses he had become quite good. Because he could not see how the wires caught the light, it was best if he hid them so that even with his senses he could not see them stick out from the foliage.

Tokugawa Manzo—that had been the name of the man he had attacked in Kumo—supposedly. In all honesty, he could barely remember the attack on Kumo, he just distinctly remembered not killing anyone, and he also remembered snatches of the chaos that followed the first strike. What if other people in Kumo recognized him for who he was? What if someone else knew of his previous affiliation with Oto? If the Raikage had tried negotiating with Orochimaru, then chances were that they were in contact, or at least on speaking terms, which meant that he was once again vulnerable.

Once the Raikage had failed to have the Chuunin Exams held in Kumo, chances were that the attacks on the border had not ceased, and if things were as they were before—with the Raikage wishing for peace—then there could be trouble for him. It would be too easy for someone to recognize him from the attack, report to the Raikage that one of Orochimaru's followers was wandering around Kumo, and after that it wouldn't take long for it to be discovered what had happened. Blind or no, Sasuke could foresee the possibility that the Raikage would put him in custody so that he could offer Orochimaru his 'container' back in exchange for peace.

Not that he couldn't handle himself in evading capture, but if he resisted it might make the peace between Konoha and Kumo become very strained. In the event that he allowed himself to become captured, he knew that he could probably escape immediately after being put in Oto's hands, but then Orochimaru would become aware that he was still alive and would want him dead for knowing Oto's secrets or want him studied for his chakra senses—which was linked to the Sharingan and Byakuugan.

Sasuke put the final exploding tag in place of his trap web—there was no chance that anyone, from anywhere, would be able to get past it or disarm it if they discovered it. Any tampering in the trap would set it off, and the only way to disarm it would be from the center, in camp. Sasuke landed neatly on the inside of the trap circle, holding the end of the wire that would be the disarming wire in camp, studying his work.

Whatever happened, he would have to be on his guard, at least until they were out of Kumo. As a last resort he could offer information on Oto to the Raikage, but he would rather not do that. Anything he knew he would sooner give to Konoha than Kumo, seeing as their relationship was strained, he was not going to give anything to Konoha's possible-future-enemy if he could help it.

With that last thought in his mind, he turned about and headed back to the camp, the wire trailing behind him as he went. He didn't need to see the two forms in the campsite in order to know that they were there, his chakra senses had already told him that Sakura was in the direction of the river, Naruto was bustling about camp on Sakura's order and Kumo's delegate was lounging around lazily. It wasn't until Sasuke actually entered the campfire until he realized that Naruto was stoking a campfire and that everything except his own belongings had been set up.

Ignoring the two of them, he tied off the end of the trap, securing the end of the wire with a paper seal. It was as he was pulling his bedroll off his backpack that Naruto spoke to him.

"Oi, Sasuke," from behind him, Sasuke could see that Naruto was holding three large water containers in his lap, "Catch."

Sasuke gave a nod and turned enough so that he could catch the canteens being thrown in his direction. He snatched each one out of the air with ease as they came flying towards him, never fumbling once. Naruto had raised his eyebrows slightly and opened his mouth to comment, but their client beat him to it.

"Nice catch for a blind person," he commented, trying to sound casual, but Sasuke knew that he was hoping that he would boast about his ability and make it apparent how he could see. He was going to be disappointed.

"What do you want me to do with these?" he asked Naruto, indicating to the stack of canteens that had accumulated by his feet.

"Sakura-chan said to tell you to fill them up," Naruto replied, turning back to the fire, "We didn't have time to restock our water in town before you found out that Orochimaru's scum were crawling around. Hurry and fill them, up, we don't have enough water left to make some ramen!"

Giving a dismissive snort, Sasuke got to his feet, dampening the degree to which his chakra senses could see, focusing instead on the ground in front of him to conserve on chakra. Following his senses he tuned out Naruto's prattling about ramen and their client's tuneless humming following the sound of running water, Sakura's chakra signature near the river's edge drawing nearer. He walked to what he believed was upstream so the water would be clean when he filled the canteens, but it was as he exited the surrounding foliage out to the riverbank, that he heard an alarmed squeak. There was a subsequent splash as Sakura's chakra signature threw itself into the river.

Alarmed, he expanded his senses outwards to the water, scanning over the opaque rippling surface, searching for any indication that Sakura was all right. After a moment, her peeved expression emerged from the rough surface, water droplets clinging to her skin.

"Naruto what the *hell* do you think you're doing?!" she exclaimed angrily while wiping the water from her eyes, "I thought I told you that I was going to—Sasuke!"

Her eyes blinked at him, her anger instantly transforming to surprise; it was then that Sasuke noticed that her shoulders were bare. That would account for her strange behaviour, he noted, as he turned his head away more for politeness' sake—he could still technically "see" her. He was very glad, at the moment, that his chakra could not penetrate the water's surface.

He cleared his throat awkwardly. "Sorry," he muttered with embarrassment, "I didn't realize..."

He trailed off, knowing that he needn't say anything further. She got a very embarrassed look on her face and ducked down into the water just below her nose, in a self-conscious manner, the tips of her hair dipping down into the water.

"I didn't see anything," he added after a moment, bending down by the river's edge, uncapping the first canister, and dipping it down into the water, "If that's what you're worried about."

She raised herself out of the water just enough so that the water level was just below her jaw, "I guess Naruto didn't tell you that I was going to wash—I asked him to."

Saying nothing in return, he merely shook his head, pulling the canteen out of the water and replacing the cap. He grabbed the second one and began to repeat the procedure. Sakura was silent as well, but after a moment, her face was marred with a slight frown, a couple of drops sliding off her face as she did so.

"...Wait... You should have been able to know without Naruto telling you—you can sense my chakra," she said, her voice puzzled, "Why'd you come?"

"I thought maybe you were just washing dishes or something," he replied, but he was a little surprised that Sakura would ask—it was obviously a mistake, he had no intention of walking in on her while she was bathing. In fact, if it weren't the comfortable relationship they had back home, he probably would have left right away; she knew he would be gone soon, and didn't seem to mind that he was lingering for a few minutes.

"I think you're lying," she said suddenly, her voice sounding smug.

"What?"

"I bet you really came here to spy on me," there was a large teasing grin on her face.

"No," he replied indignantly, setting aside the second canister, pausing as he reached for the third.

A teasing smile played widely on her face. "Ne, Sasuke-kun's a peeker!" she splashed some water in his direction, making a face.

A small amused grin played on his lips as he stuck his hand in the water in front of him, manipulating it with his chakra, and a second later, a small wave of water lifted up from the water, splashing over Sakura's face. He gave an amused 'hn' as she spluttered in annoyance for a second in surprise.

"Oh, stop it with the smirk," she said with teasing anger, "You were the one who said we should conserve on chakra! And now you're the one who is wasting it on making me wet with your water ninjutsu."

"You're already wet," he pointed out, "You jumped in, remember?"

"Yes well, I think that was understandable," she retorted playfully.

"Hn," he replied with a smirk, reaching for the final container once again.

"I didn't know that you could use water ninjutsu," she said passively after a moment, the water level now just below her shoulders, slightly adrift.

"Just because I no longer possess the Sharingan doesn't mean that I can't use the techniques that I learned through it."

She said nothing to this, simply idling where she was, her shoulders dipping up and down in the water as the current shifted around her. "...We're working on that."

"It doesn't matter, Sakura," he said firmly, "You are trying to get my sight back as it is, and that's very unlikely already. If you do get it back, I'll be thankful—it'll be more than I already hope for."

"I promise to get it back," she told him seriously, "The Sharingan, I promise."

"Don't make promises you can't keep," he told her, putting the cap on the final canteen.

"I don't."

Saying nothing in return, he fastened the lid securely, subsequently setting it down with the rest. There was a grim silence between the two of them, and he didn't know what to say. He didn't want her to overexert herself over his eyesight, yet he didn't know how to tell her no, because he also wanted his eyesight to return. He opened his mouth to speak, but then on the edge of his awareness, he sensed Naruto's chakra signature heading in their direction at a hurried speed.

"Naruto is running full-tilt towards us," he informed Sakura, getting to his feet, slinging the full canteens over his shoulder, "It seems he's remembered to tell me that you're out here."

She nodded, understanding that he was excusing himself from her presence; they both knew that they would never hear the end of it if they were found—and nobody would believe that it was a mistake. Turning, he headed back towards camp, the canteens over his shoulder, and the river falling behind. A few seconds later, his best friend burst through the bushes and into his chakra senses, looking agitated and breathless.

"Ah! Sasuke! Sakura-chan was going to—I mean is—" he was babbling, "—or is in the process of—... You didn't run into her did you?"

"Yes, I did," he replied irritably, "Luckily she hadn't started bathing yet, and I was able to fill these up. Remember to tell me these things next time, dobe."

"Well, *sorry* , teme!" Naruto replied grouchily, "Is it my fault that our bastard of a client's complaining caused me to forget? Sakura-chan's gonna kill me! Good thing she hadn't started yet."

His voice sound relieved, but Sasuke knew otherwise. Sakura wouldn't berate Naruto about it, because then she would have to admit that she had been walked in on, which would have been a little more than awkward. He himself said nothing more on the matter but shoved a canteen at Naruto to carry, ignoring the cry of complaint that came as a result. He and Sakura knew a different story than what Naruto did. He could feel the back of his neck getting warmer as they walked back to camp, trying—and failing—to get the image of a certain, bare-shouldered, pink-haired kunoichi out of his mind.

Echoing vibrations fading from muffled to clear and back to being muffled again woke Nariko as the tumult of sounds vibrated in her semi-conscious mind. Voices—there were voices, she realized. Sitting up from her bedroll on the floor, she listened.

There were two rooms in Flower-chan's suite in the hideout: a bedroom, and a study. Flower-chan had told Nariko that she had pulled some strings in order to get such a big space for just herself—most people had to have roommates because of the lack of space. Nariko wasn't entirely sure what "pulling some strings" was supposed to mean, but she supposed it meant that she had convinced someone to get the rooms.

Nariko shared the bedroom with Flower-chan, but Flower-chan often wouldn't come until later at night after she was asleep and sometimes she was gone in the morning before Nariko woke. The study was a larger room than the bedroom, and harbored a desk and a few other accumulated things—that was the room where the window was, the one that could look out over the valley.

The voices were coming from the study—they sounded like they were arguing...two people? Nariko pushed back the covers and crawled over to the closed door that separated the study and the

bedroom. Putting her ear against the cool metal of the door she listened carefully to who was speaking. It was two people, Nariko confirmed, and one of them was Flower-chan.

"You realize what you're asking from me?" came her muffled voice from on the other side of the door—she sounded angry, but not angry where her voice showed it. Her voice was cold and flat—similar to how Itachi spoke.

"I'm asking you to do what you do best—get information," came the other voice, Nariko couldn't tell who it was, but it was a man.

"I don't see what you need information from him for, we know why he's here, and we know what he's been doing," Flower-chan retorted icily, "I don't see why you need me at all. He has nothing else that torture can't get out of him."

"Look, I think he's more resistant to torture than he would be to you," was the reply, it sounded patient, but Nariko wasn't so sure that the person actually was, "You know who he is, yeah?"

"Yes, I do know who he is, Deidara," Flower-chan answered patiently, the chill still hanging in her voice, "And that's exactly why what you're asking me won't work. He knows me."

"What do you mean 'he knows you?'" Deidara replied, sounding confused, "Look, I 'm not the one who wants the information, yeah! *He* 's the one who told me to get you to do it. I just thought he wanted you to get information the way you normally do! How was I supposed to know that he knew you?"

"I suppose it figures that Pein would want me to talk to him—probably safer too," came a quiet scoff from Flower-chan, her voice without emotion, "Okay Dei, I'm only going to say this once. Pein may send me on missions to gather information, but my methods are of my own design. He never has any say in how I do things. Don't forget that."

"Listen, Flower-chan—"

"I've told you not to call me that," she snapped, but Deidara continued like he hadn't been interrupted.

"You have to go talk to him, *he* wants you to, and you know what he'll do if you don't obey his orders."

There was a long silence from the other side of the door. Where they even still in the room? She put her hand on the doorknob and was about open it when finally Flower-chan spoke.

"I know," the utterance was so faint that Nariko almost didn't catch it. "Of course I'm going to do it—even though I think if you put Hidan in the same room with his scythe, you'd get more out of him."

Nariko frowned slightly—it sounded like Flower-chan was speaking to someone else, because it didn't sound like Deidara was being spoken to; but there didn't seem to be anyone else in the room. It was like she was talking to someone in her head.

"I don't want to have to do this," Flower-chan said after a moment, "I don't think that I should be the one to do the interrogation."

"I know," Deidara replied, his voice sounding bitter and resentful, "But we all have to do things that we don't want to do, but we don't have much choice, do we?"

"No, we don't," she replied; Nariko had the feeling that Flower-chan knew something that Deidara didn't, like there was something she wasn't saying. There was third pause.

Nariko turned the doorknob ever so slowly and opened the door just a crack, peeking through to see what was going on. The room was lit, and she could see Flower-chan through the crack, sitting down on the desk's surface, a blank expression on the woman's face. Deidara's hand was there too, resting on Flower-chan's cheek. Deidara took a step forwards and now Nariko could see him as well,

not very much, but his face was visible. He looked...grim. After a moment he tucked some of Flower-chan's azure hair behind her ear and was leaning in closer to her when Flower-chan put a hand on his chest, stopping him.

"You know I hate it when you blank your face like that damned Itachi's," Deidara said with a softer tone in his voice, "You've been doing that too much lately. Just be yourself."

"Stop it with your sympathies, Dei," she said sharply, her face allowed the smallest amount of misery, "Your palm-given kisses don't do a thing for me. Now, where is he?"

"The prisoner?"

Flower-chan gave a nod.

"He's in one of the holding rooms," Deidara replied, dropping his hand down to his side, "Do you need anything, yeah?"

"I'll need you to go down to Storage room B, and grab a stack of paper that's sitting in a box sitting next to the door..." Flower-chan stated, standing up so that she was only partially visible through the crack, and Deidara was completely out of sight. They were walking towards the exit now.

The door shut behind them as they left, and Nariko pushed the door all the way open. What prisoner? What was going on? Curiosity born from the isolated life she had lived up until a few months ago compelled her to follow, to find answers to what she was asking. Itachi was not there to explain what was going on, so she had to find her own explanations. She scampered over to the door that was between the office and the hallway—between her and her answers—opening it quickly.

She could still catch Flower-chan and Deidara talking and after closing the door behind her, she ran after the sounds. Picking her

way carefully, she caught up to them relatively quickly—they did not seem to be in any hurry.

"I'll meet you back here," Flower-chan told Deidara emptily, coming to a stop to face him—Nariko had spent enough time around Flower-chan to know that even though the bitterness was no longer in her voice, she was still angry about whatever she didn't want to do. Nariko didn't know why, but a lot of people at Akatsuki would act as if nothing was wrong even if they were really angry or saddened. "I'm going to go get a few things that I'll need for the interrogation."

Giving a nod, Deidara turned and went down one hallway, while Flower-chan went down another route in the branch of the tunnels. This posed a dilemma for her, should she follow Flower-chan? Or should she follow Deidara? She wasn't sure which she should do—she was more inclined to follow Flower-chan, but she wasn't sure if she should, what if she lost her—Flower-chan walked really quickly—or if she was seen? Even though she had followed them, she wasn't sure if she'd get in trouble if she was found.

By the time that Nariko had made up her mind to follow Flower-chan, she had already disappeared around the corner. Biting her lip uncertainly, she loitered in the junction for a few minutes. They said they'd be coming back...she could wait until then, couldn't she? She just hoped nobody else would come along through this tunnel until then. But it was late at night, so there wouldn't be anyone, would there?

Time ticked by slowly to her as she waited—if it were not for the nagging pull of curiosity, she would have left a long time ago for fear of being found. She wondered what was taking so long, even though it had only been a few minutes.

"Oi."

Nariko almost jumped out of her skin, her heart pounding as she whirled around, only to come face to face with Deidara. He was

staring down at her, his gaze somewhat displeased as he studied her.

"What are you doing here, un?" he asked her, his voice sharp.

"I...I..." the words failed her in her mouth as she looked away; she didn't know what to say. Would he be mad at her if she told him that she had been following him and Flower-chan? Her hands started to tremble, followed by the rest of her body. Something strange was beginning to happen then, her fingertips were beginning to tingle, and she felt this twisting sensation begin in her stomach.

"It's okay, yeah!" Deidara said suddenly and she looked up at him again, and much to her surprise she saw alarm on his face, "You're not in trouble. Just calm down."

She wasn't in trouble—the news slowly registered and the tingling in her fingertips quelled along with the strange writhing in her stomach. She nodded slowly, but her brain was working furiously. It was almost like it had been back when those boys had been hurting her, she had felt the tingling in her fingertips then, but it was much stronger. Had she almost done the same thing to Deidara? Whatever it was, he knew something was off, he could tell that something was changing inside her. He knew about the demon too, she realized, he knew that it had been waking up.

"Deidara, what happened?" Flower-chan caused Nariko to jump again as she appeared behind her. How could all the Akatsuki members move so quietly? She could never hear them coming. "What was that flash of chakra?"

"I found her standing here," Deidara explained, turning to look at Flower-chan, "I startled her, and then..."

"Bijuu," Flower-chan breathed; she turned to Nariko and looked her in the eye, a gaze that Nariko couldn't meet, "Listen, Kit, it's okay. Nobody is going to hurt you here—I'm supposed to keep you safe, but I can't do that if you go wandering around without telling me."

Nodding mutely, Nariko wrung her hands behind her back.

"Now, why are you out here, Kit?"

"I...I heard you and Deidara-sama talking and I followed you," she said quietly and then looked at Flower-chan with a terrified glance, "I was just wondering why you sounded so mad, so... I'm sorry... I didn't know that I shouldn't..."

Closing her eyes, Flower-chan paused and took a deep breath, "It's okay, Kit. Just don't do it again, okay? Not everything is for your ears to hear."

"What are we going to do with her?" Deidara asked after Nariko had given a nod of understanding.

"Take her with us for now, I suppose," was the reply, "You can escort her back to my quarters once you've secured me inside the holding cell."

Deidara nodded, and then held out a box that Nariko assumed Flower-chan had asked for earlier. Taking the box from him, Flower-chan looked inside, and then, balancing the box in one arm, she took a small vile from her other pocket. Noticing that both she and Deidara were looking on with curiosity, Flower-chan allowed a small smirk on her emotionless face.

"Diluted contact poison," she explained, more to Deidara than Nariko, who didn't know what contact poison was, "If you think regular paper cuts sting, then you don't want to get cut by this."

She then set the box on the ground and opened up the lid of the vile. There was a lot of liquid within, and it had a pungent odor when the lid came off. Nariko wrinkled her nose in disgust; Flower-chan put the vile down on the ground next to the box, and straightened up. What she did next fascinated Nariko more than anything that had happened so far. So quickly that she could hardly catch the movements with her eyes, Flower-chan folded her hands together in

a number of different ways, and then it was over nearly as quickly as it had began.

There was a rustling from the box, and slowly, each piece of paper began to lift from within. With wide eyes, Nariko stared in wonder as each of the pieces of paper folded themselves into little birds; there were probably hundreds of them, she thought in wonder as they flapped around the hallway noisily. So immersed by the flight of the little inanimate birds, she forgot about Deidara and Flower-chan until one of them spoke.

"They'd be better if they exploded, un," Deidara smirked, looking at the small birds as well.

Flower-chan, who held the vile in her hand again, was snatching the birds out of the sky, and pouring the liquid on them one by one. "If one exploded the rest would burst into flame—and then I'd be without paper," she replied, still collecting birds out of the air.

The birds had begun to separate themselves into two groups, ones that been caught by Flower-chan, and ones that had yet to be snatched out of the air by her. Slowly the one group grew as the other dwindled until all of them had the 'contact poison' on them.

"Okay, I'm ready," Flower-chan stated, slipping the vile back in the pocket of her cloak, "Lead the way, Rembrandt."

Deidara smirked and took up the lead, heading down the pathway that Flower-chan had taken in order to get the 'contact poison'. Nariko cast a glance at the older woman, who gave a nod to indicate she was to follow, and then the timid Jinchuuriki followed after, Flower-chan bringing up the rear.

Nariko didn't really pay much attention to where they were going, as the birds kept her mesmerized. They followed their little band of three wherever they went, hovering over them in a flurry of white. The birds had been rather wet at first as they went down the halls, and they had stayed to the one side, letting the 'contact poison' drip

on the ground instead of on their heads. But now as they had dried, they were flying around freely, and the smell of the poison had disappeared as well.

They came to a halt in front of a large metal door; Deidara pulled some metal objects from his pockets and fumbled with the doorknob. Nariko was fascinated as he turned one of the metal objects in a hole and then opened the door.

"I'll be back for you later," Deidara told Flower-chan as the little birds zoomed in through the door.

Nodding silently, the azure-haired woman followed the birds into the dark room. Nariko glanced inside around her to see who was in there, but she didn't get a long look before Deidara closed the door and fiddled with the little metal sticks again.

"Alright, come on, yeah," Deidara told her once he had pocketed the little metal objects.

The walk back to Flower-chan's room was a silent one. So many questions swirled around in Nariko's head, just like the little paper birds had swirled around in the air. But despite all the questions that were in her head, his mind kept drifting back to the prisoner she had seen in the dark room. He had been an older man—older than any of the people she had seen at Akatsuki, who had spiked gray hair that was tied in a ponytail in the back. Two red marks extended from his bottom eyelids down over his face reaching down to his chin, and a metal forehead guard with a character scratched into it kept his unruly hair out of his face.

"Deidara-sama?"

"Un?"

"Who was that man in the room we put Flower-chan in?" she asked, looking up at Deidara questioningly, but looked away again when he met her gaze.

"Well, I suppose there's not harm in telling you," he said after a moment, "His name is Jiraiya, yeah."

"Why is Flower-chan supposed to get information from him?" she found herself asking, even though she knew that it was probably outside her need to know, "Is he dangerous?"

"He's not all that dangerous right now, yeah," Deidara replied, as they stopped outside Flower-chan's suite, "He's a writer; that's all I can tell you. Now go back to sleep—Flower-chan'll be in later, yeah?"

What a writer was, she didn't know, but Nariko thought it was best that she didn't ask any more questions, so she just nodded and slipped inside the room. Closing the door behind her, she tried her best to put the matter from her mind; it was raining outside again, and she paused to listen to the sound of the rain. She just wanted Itachi to be back.

A/N: Yep, I'm still calling her Flower-chan. Still need that place where I can start calling her Konan. And I know that in comparison to the manga, what I imagined her personality to be is considerably different from how she turned out. But, if you compare her current personality (in the story) to how she acts as a kid, she's more or less the same. I think that part of her personality would be the same after all these years. I know she seems a little ooc, atm, but Konan will have moments where she acts like her cold empty self.

Chapter 31

A/N: Okay, one person commented that they didn't know what Nariko's purpose in the story is at this point. Me, being the author, realizes the very important role she has to play, but it isn't really shown until near the end of the story. Right now her primary purpose is to allow the readers to take a peek inside what the Akatsuki are up to, and when Itachi is around, to develop his character as he gets to know her better and grows more attached to her. She may seem kind of pointless right now, but when Itachi (censored for spoilers), she will play a crucial role in order to ensure that (censored for spoilers), and thus (censored for spoilers), paving the way for (censored for spoilers). Is it clear to everyone why Nariko is important now?

Chapter Thirty-One: Cornered

According to Sasuke, they still were not being followed, but despite that, Sakura still had her reservations over Oto's nin. It wasn't like she thought Sasuke was lying—though Tokugawa clearly thought that he was—but she found it suspicious that they had not been sought after yet. She thought about what Sasuke had said yesterday, about Oto's ninja having genetic modifications and advanced technology in order to listen in on what was going on—to prevent being overheard, she scrawled simple messages into Sasuke's palm, asking him if he thought that was what was happening again. Most of the questions were yes or no so he could nod or shake his head. As a result, Tokugawa Manzo was even more convinced that they were together, as they were sending 'secret messages' to each other. Sakura had said nothing to this, even though she would have liked to.

She had scrawled a quick message in Sasuke's palm explaining that she wanted to pretend like nothing had changed, like they didn't

know if they were going to be followed or not; that way, any pursuers that may be following them would think that their travel plans were unchanged, and make assumptions on their movements based on that information.

The morning had passed without incident, but Sakura was on edge, scrawling messages of inquiry to Sasuke every now and again, to make sure that they still weren't being followed. Of course he couldn't tell if they were out of range, but they would know the instant they tried to come closer. The road was busier that day and they did pass a couple parties along the way—but they turned out to be regular travelers, not shinobi. However, each member of Team Seven had their hands over their shuriken holsters whenever they passed someone.

Other than greeting the occasional group, there was light conversation between the four of them; however Tokugawa often chose not to throw any comments in. The conversation that was currently going on was of little importance, yet it broke the silence and kept the tension down—to an extent. The current topic was about being a part-time shinobi.

"Like I know there are other occupations out there besides being a shinobi," Naruto was saying casually, watching the path ahead, "Like Ero-sennin writes part-time—he writes those books that Kakashi-sensei likes so much, but I don't see how he can do that. Being a shinobi is a very demanding job, and there's little time to write."

"Well, he manages somehow," Sakura threw in lightly not really paying much attention, "He has so many books published—every time I see Kakashi-sensei, he has a different volume."

"Writing would be a dull occupation though," Naruto threw in, "I think it would be so boring—especially if you have to write scenes in which characters are traveling around," Naruto persisted, "That's got to be so boring to read too: when the characters are just wandering about."

"It's not like it has to all be description—I'm sure the author could fill it with conversation or character development," Sakura said in reply, frowning slightly, "When people are having conversation in a story, the traveling seems to go a lot faster, and the characters get where they're going quicker. If done properly, the readers won't notice."

"Since when do you know so much about writing, Sakura-chan?" Naruto asked, his voice curious.

"I enjoy a good book every now and again," she replied simply.

"Not that this conversation isn't interesting, or anything," Tokugawa commented blithely, clearly bored, "But it's past noon already, and we haven't stopped to eat once today. I know you're trying to pick up the pace so that we can get to Rai before we run into trouble, but not all of us have the same stamina."

"I realize that, Tokugawa-san," Sakura replied evenly, looking over at the grouchy politician, "There's a teahouse about a kilometer from here, and I was planning on stopping there for lunch."

There was a grunt from their client, and silence after that. Sakura's mind wandered aimlessly around; having recently asked Sasuke if they were being followed and receiving a shake of the head, she wasn't particularly concerned about being followed at that moment—or at least she hadn't been, until Sasuke faltered slightly. Turning her head, she looked at him, but he seemed completely fine.

"You okay? Did you trip?" she asked, concerned; Naruto glanced over his shoulder briefly, and Tokugawa stared curiously.

"No, I'm fine," Sasuke replied, Sakura was worried still. If something was the matter, she knew that he would not dare to say anything out loud. She took his hand in hers and scrawled a message on his palm.

' Did you sense someone following us?'

None of the people they had passed has shown any indications of turning around and following them—that was what Sasuke was watching for, someone following. He paused at her question and then he shrugged his shoulders.

' *Maybe?*'

He nodded.

' *Many?*'

A shake of the head.

' *Shinobi?*'

Another shrug, "There are many people at the teahouse."

Sakura assumed that it meant that he could have picked up on the signature of one of the locals—maybe mistaking the movement of the signature for being followed.

"Oi! Sakura-chan! I see the teahouse!" Naruto exclaimed enthusiastically from the front of their formation, "I hope they have ramen!"

The teahouse was a small little wooden building—it was very old, as the architecture was that of a few decades earlier. It was weatherworn, but it had a cozy air about the place, a peaceful ambience wafting out of the open windows. There were a couple of standing pots outside with colourful flowers planted in them, and the curtains were a pale pink with a white plaid pattern woven into the fabric. Naruto was the first in the door and Sakura warned Sasuke about the wooden steps out of habit, as she led him onto the small veranda.

Inside was rather quaint as well; many low tables were scattered throughout the room, cushions resting on the floor for people to sit on. In the middle of the room there was a large fire-pit, probably to

accommodate the guests during the winter months. Towards the back of the room was a curtain that probably led to a kitchen, and from that doorway, a friendly-looking woman emerged. She walked over to the new arrivals with a kind smile.

"Table for four?" she asked them.

"Yes, thank-you," Sakura replied, retuning the smile.

While they were being led to one of the nearer tables, Sakura peeked around at some of the other customers. There was a group of three men laughing and joking the corner of the room, two women were chatting lightly in a table not too far away, and a few tables away sat a man who was reading a newspaper.

"This'll be your table," the woman—whom Sakura assumed was the owner of the teahouse—told them lightly, "And we'll be closing up earlier today and won't be open tomorrow or the day after—just so you know. What can I get for you today?"

"A pot of green tea for the table, please," Sakura ordered pleasantly, tearing her attention away from the other people in the room, "And I'll have a bowl of udon soup."

"I'll have the same," Sasuke said next, folding his hands on the table.

"Ramen, dattebayo!" Naruto said enthusiastically, and Sakura smiled at his reaction.

"I'll have some natto," Tokugawa Manzo ordered, and Naruto shot him a strange look, a mix between disgust and amazement. Sakura assumed that Naruto didn't care much for natto at all.

The woman nodded and walked towards the back of the room from where she came from, leaving the four of them to wait. Sakura looked around at the table and smiled wistfully around.

"What?" Sasuke asked, sensing the smile on her face, an inquisitive expression slipping on to the emotionless mask that he wore around Tokugawa.

She shook her head slightly, still smiling, "I'm just thinking it's just like it was years ago, remember? We'd stop for lunch at places like this, Kakashi-sensei reading his book, you and Naruto would be arguing and I'd be telling you that you're being idiots again. I'm struck with nostalgia."

Naruto grinned over at her, a reminiscing expression on his face, "Yeah, I remember that. It was lots of fun, all those times. I wish Kakashi-sensei could have been with us on this mission."

"Hn," Sasuke made a noise in agreement, a faint trace of a true smile lurking behind the wry one he wore.

"It's supposed to be this way," Sakura felt herself saying, "I want it to always be like this—the three of us together."

"And Kakashi-sensei too; right Sasuke?" Naruto threw in, throwing an arm over his best friend's shoulder.

Sakura laughed as Sasuke growled, "Right—now get off me, dobe."

The food came shortly and Sakura found herself smiling as Sasuke and Naruto started arguing just like they did when they were genin, while Tokugawa just sat silently watching with raised eyebrows. Sakura didn't interrupt their argument until they were almost finished eating; withdrawing the map from her backpack, she spread it out on the cluttered table.

"Okay, you two, that's enough," she said with a small grin, smoothing the map out slightly, "There's been a change in plans and I need the two of you to be paying attention."

Sasuke gave a disgruntled 'hn' and turned his attention to the map, deliberately trying to come across that he was mature enough to

drop an argument. Sakura was just amused by his behaviour, and Naruto glared at his best friend as one last attempt to get an upper hand in the fight before looking at the map as well.

"From here I was hoping to travel this road for the rest of the day, and then after a few more hours we should reach the Land of Lightning's border," Sakura explained, indicating to the map, "We're right here at the moment, and here's the border. Now, in the event that our pursuers attack us—"

"Pursuers attack us? As in we're being pursued right now?" Tokugawa said nervously, glancing at the guy with the newspaper, and then glaring suspiciously at Sasuke.

Sasuke ignored this, and Sakura answered before Kumo's politician could make further comment, "I don't know if we are—we could be, they're outside Sasuke's range if they are. But then again nobody might be following us at all, but I think we can all agree that the sooner we get over the border, the better—regardless if we're being followed or not."

Tokugawa Manzo nodded mutely and Sakura, assuming that he was appeased, continued.

"Anyways, as I was saying, in the event that our pursuers attack us, I think we need to set up some meeting points in which we can regroup in case we get separated," Sakura said calmly, "Since we'll be taking this route—" she traced her finger over the path "—I think it would be prudent if today's meeting point be here, tomorrow's meeting point here, and then we'll meet at Kumogakure if we get separated while we're in Rai's borders."

Each meeting point was a small town, and she knew that Sasuke could not possibly see them on the map, so she grabbed his hand, her thumb automatically brushing over his knuckles, and scrawled the name of each town on his open palm. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Tokugawa glance suspiciously at them, but as her message was short, he didn't say anything.

"Are there any questions?" she asked when she was finished, and there was a collective shake of the head from everyone present, "Alright, good. I suggest we start moving again; we want to cover as much ground as possible."

After splitting the bill between Team Seven (Tokugawa refused to pay), and leaving a tip, the four of them exited the building. As Sakura stood on the veranda, she looked up at the sky. It had been threatening to rain all day, and now the clouds seemed even more ominous; she just hoped that it wouldn't rain before they made it to the point that she had planned to set up camp.

Naruto took up the lead again as they traveled down the road once more, leaving the teahouse behind them. The clouds got more sinister looking as time passed, and Sakura wasn't sure if it was her imagination because of the gloomy weather, but Sasuke seemed to be getting a little more agitated as they traveled. Twenty minutes had passed since they had made a stop at the teahouse, and as the minutes passed, the frown that was marring Sasuke's face was getting deeper, and then he came to a complete and total stop.

"What's wrong, Sasuke?" Sakura asked, as he muttered a curse to himself.

"Four signatures—I caught snatches of them, but I wasn't sure if they were following us or not," Sasuke muttered, "They're closing in on our position."

"Get off the road," Sakura ordered immediately, "Weapons out."

Naruto had grabbed Tokugawa and shoved him off the road and into the ditch while Sasuke had leapt up into the canopy of a nearby tree. Sakura, wanting to be kept appraised of their enemies' movement, followed Sasuke and alighted lightly next to him. His one hand was clamped onto the branch that they sat on, and judging by the pressure he was applying to the wood, he was frustrated at his inability to recognize the danger in time.

She looked at him apprehensively, studying his face; an expression of frustrated anger marred his face and she bit her lip. Reaching out she grabbed his hand and after running her thumb reassuringly over his knuckles, she began to scribble on it furiously, but precisely, glancing around nervously. As far as she could tell, there was nobody in the vicinity.

' Shinobi?'

A nod. She had thought as much.

' How many?'

He held up four fingers without hesitation. Four shinobi from Oto had found them. It was less than before, but they were most likely more powerful.

' Chuunin?' She could at least hope...

He shook his head firmly.

' Jounin?'

A firm nod. Whether he could tell this by the chakra signatures or just because he was knowledgeable about whom Orochimaru would send next, she didn't know. Either way it was bad news for the group; two chuunin, and a genin—who was probably jounin level skill—against four jounin.

' Is it likely that they'll be able to see us?'

A shake of the head, and she breathed a small sigh of relief—if they couldn't be seen, then it was likely that Sasuke could indicate their location without their actions being observed.

' Where?'

Slowly Sasuke raised his arm and pointed his finger forwards down the path. "There..." he muttered quietly before pointing off to the left

of the path, "...there..." He now pointed to the right of the path, "...there..." He turned about so that his arm was almost directly behind them, "...and there."

She closed her eyes in contemplation. They were surrounded. There were three in front and one behind—impossibly to break through forwards and cut off from behind. She weighed options in her mind, Inner Sakura sorting out priorities. The best outcome would be all of them surviving, the worst would be for all of them to die, and the most important thing was for Tokugawa to get to Kumo. If they tried to charge forwards, the sheer number of skilled shinobi would overpower them, and if they tried to go back, the one behind would probably slow them down enough to allow the other three to catch them.

It would do no good to go back, Sakura decided, for even to go back and around, the ones in front could still easily cut them off. However if they managed to break through a weak point in the formation... Well there was no way that the four of them could outrun their adversaries, but if someone stayed behind in order to hold them off...

"What are you planning?" Sasuke uttered very quietly, so that she almost didn't hear it.

'What is largest gap between the three ahead of us?'

A considerate pause came from Sasuke before he lifted his arm again; he indicated between the center and the right shinobi. He gave her an inquisitive look.

'I'm going to send our client and one other ahead,' she scrawled, glancing warily around for any changes in the area, 'Two will hold them off. Advise me. Who do you think is best fitted for going onwards and who should hold them back?'

He reached out and grabbed the hem of the armhole on her tank top, tugging gently so that she was closer to him. He put his mouth in

front of her ear, so close that his nose was touching her skin; when he spoke, they were barely detectable, even at that close a proximity.

"Send Naruto with the client," he whispered, his breath tickling her skin slightly, "He has the most chakra, and strength. His regenerative abilities will also come in handy. He is the one who—"

Suddenly Sasuke's were cut off as his lips suddenly made contact with Sakura's skin—this would be a direct result of him tipping forwards into her, forcing himself to grab her so that she did not fall from the tree's branch.

"What are you guys planning up here?" came Naruto's voice from the other side of Sasuke.

Sasuke quickly removed his lips from Sakura's cheek and let go of her once he was certain that she was not going to fall. Sakura herself felt her skin heat up as a scarlet blush enveloped her face. Naruto had leapt up to join them, not liking the feeling of being kept out of the loop, and had bumped Sasuke by mistake, causing him to kiss her on the cheek. Anger, born out of mortification, seized her and she lashed out at Naruto in the most fierce whisper should could muster.

"Naruto, what are you doing?!" she hissed angrily at the confused fox-faced boy, who was currently oblivious of her blush, "Why aren't you guarding Tokugawa-san?! Get back down there right now!"

"Ano, Sakura-chan, I—"

He wasn't able to say anything more as Sakura reached behind Sasuke, took a fistful of Naruto's orange hoodie and yanked furiously, causing him to fall from the foliage of the tree. Ignoring Naruto's muttered complaints from the tree's base, she turned back to Sasuke; she could see that the back of his neck was probably the same colour as her face. At the moment, she was thankful that

Sasuke's Sharingan gene did not possess the thermographic vision that the Byakuugan did.

"You were saying," she said awkwardly.

Sasuke cleared his throat and came close to her again, but Sakura noticed that it was not nearly as close as he had been before, "The person who would be the most effective on his own, while keeping our client safe would be Naruto."

He pulled away after finishing his sentence and Sakura gave a nod; he had a point—the demon fox in Naruto would provide enough strength and chakra in order to keep a fight going for a long time, and Naruto knew his boundaries—he would not do anything stupid.

She gave a tug to Sasuke's sleeve before jumping down to the bottom of the tree, where Naruto was waiting, with a grouchy expression on his face, and Tokugawa, who was looking apprehensive. A sudden rush of wind came down the path from whence they had just come and swept the area around them, a few moments later, a shower of rain swept onto the four of them. Sakura blinked in surprise at how quickly the downpour had swept over them.

"The weather changes in an instant in this area," Tokugawa said covering his head with his arms in a poor attempt to shelter himself from the sudden torrent.

"Sakura," Sasuke called, and Sakura looked over at him; he was standing perfectly still as the wind and rain whipped around him, like he was completely oblivious to the weather, "The rain and rustling leaves will make it difficult for them to hear us. You should tell them the plan quickly."

She gave a quick nod and turning to the other two, she explained quickly what she had in mind. When she was finished, Naruto gave her a grim look, only enhance by his wet and droopy attire. She

knew that he probably didn't like the idea of leaving two of his friends behind to face four jounin.

"Naruto, we're counting on you," she told him before he could speak his mind to them, "We trust you, okay? So trust us to be all right. You know where the meeting point is—but if we don't show up by noon tomorrow, go on without us."

"But, Sakura-chan—"

"Please don't argue, Naruto," she replied seriously, "Wait again at the second meeting point, and if we're not there by noon of the day after tomorrow, continue onwards to Kumo."

"Alright, Sakura-chan," he said with resignation, "You two had better be careful."

"We'll be fine," she assured Naruto quickly, "Sasuke, they haven't moved have they?"

He shook his head once.

"Then let's go."

The four of them dashed out from their place of refuge, Naruto in the lead, Sakura and Sasuke behind, and Tokugawa in the center. Running as fast as they could, they made their way to the largest gap between the four sound shinobi—a gap that was quickly closing as they approached, their escape now realized. Out of the corner of Sakura's eye she saw a shadow flicking through the trees and without hesitation she flung a kunai into the foliage. A feeble attempt, but she noted with satisfaction that the form leapt backwards in order to avoid the weapon—a minor delay was better than none at all.

"They're closing in," Sasuke told the group, and Sakura could confirm that—she could hear footfalls coming from behind.

"Alright you two, we'll hold them off from here," Sakura ordered and both Tokugawa and Naruto increased their speed as they ran, "Go!"

Digging her heel into the ground she turned around and faced the oncoming enemy, Sasuke standing next to her, his kunai knife already out. Two of Oto's ninja appeared from the foliage, one running down the actual path, the other one stumbling out of the bushes. The other ones remained still, but they were not moving, so Naruto and their client were safe. For the moment.

Sakura prepared herself to attack, but then she noticed that one of the shinobi, the one who had come running down the path, held an expression of shock on her face; she was staring straight at Sasuke, her mouth open slightly in what was apparently surprise.

"Uchiha Sasuke," she stated bluntly, seeming lost for any other words—it wasn't a question, she recognized Sasuke. This complicated matters—as long as at least one of them knew that Sasuke was alive, they'd have to kill them all. That was how it was playing out to be anyways, at this rate, but...

Sasuke had narrowed his sightless eyes, the grip on his kunai increasing; he said nothing in response to the shinobi. The other one before them faltered as well.

"What?" said that one, fixing Sasuke with a suspicious look, "Uchiha Sasuke is dead."

A smirk formed at the corner of Sasuke's mouth, "That's good to hear. And it's the truth—the Uchiha Sasuke you knew has been dead a long time."

Evidently taking advantage of the enemy's distraction, Sasuke lunged forwards so quickly that Sakura barely caught the movement. In a fluid motion, the one who had proclaimed Sasuke dead was doubled over in pain in the stomach, but Sakura didn't pay much attention as she was now attacking the female shinobi who had recognized Sasuke. She had a little time to recover and was now on

the defensive as Sakura lunged at her; as she dodged the lunge, Sakura reworked her footing and came about in a surprise rebound attack. She had to deal with this woman quickly otherwise the others could catch up to Naruto.

She focused the chakra in her fist and aimed for the jounin's head, but unfortunately, she dodged, and her fist met the air. Not one to be overpowered, Sakura continued her lunge forwards so that her fist met the ground, causing it to crack and break. The ground rose and fell all around her, a sea of mud due to the recent rainfall, sliding about them. Sakura leapt nimbly away from the fray and alighted outside the damage range, seeing Sasuke had done the same on the other side of the damaged ground. Both their opponents were trying to get out of the ground that had suddenly opened up beneath them.

Sakura quickly formed hand seals and planted her hand on the ground after the last sign; the earth closed up around their opponents. The one had gotten caught, and it was too late to escape, the ground caught the man around the waist and effectively crushed his lower torso. The woman, however, was more nimble and managed to crawl out of the crevasse she had fallen into before the earth enclosed around her. Sakura lunged forwards at her again as she pulled herself from the earth and managed to catch her in the shoulder with her punch. There was the satisfying noise of bones breaking.

The rain seemed to pelt harder down as time passed; it dragged on for what seemed like eternity, but in reality it was only a few minutes. Sasuke was doing well with his opponents—he was able to keep track of all of them, preventing any from pursuing their client and Naruto. They were doing exceptionally well, considering it was two on one, however they ran into their first bit of trouble, when one of the observers from the branches of the tree came to intercept a killing blow that Sakura was about to deliver onto the woman she had been attacking. Sasuke's warning shout came a moment too late, and the kunai knife that would have caught her across her

abdomen missed, however it caught her in a deep cut in the flesh above her hip bone.

Quick in retaliation, Sakura managed to swing her kunai around and slash at the shinobi, but he dodged as well, so her knife caught him in the shoulder. Both the woman and the man had managed to get out of her attacking range, and now she was injured. Cursing herself over her carelessness, she glanced at the wound, putting her hand over it. It was gushing a lot of blood—not enough to be fatal, but if the fight lasted a few hours, she would run into trouble from blood loss. This fight had to end quickly—that much was apparent before, but she couldn't be much help to Sasuke if she was impaired...she would have to use a genjutsu...a powerful one at that.

The two shinobi had noticed her weakness and were trying to take advantage of that. Sakura was having a difficult time of getting out of the way, almost getting injured more a number of times. The first lightning kunai caused her to almost jump out of her skin as it whizzed by and managed to deter one of her attackers. Sasuke was creating small little kunai out of what appeared to be a variation of his chidori. With his three-sixty degree vision, he was managing to help keep off Sakura's opponents somewhat, by throwing the chirping darts at them.

Sakura spent the next few minutes dodging attacks, with the occasional help from Sasuke, her wound aching terribly with each movement, but she was planning the whole time. It would consume a vast amount of chakra, but if she cast it large enough, she might be able to catch all of them in it—of course Sasuke would be at risk of being caught in it as well, but he would recognize it as an illusion immediately. However it would be her most powerful genjutsu—something she hadn't even tried putting on him without applying the chakra to the back of the head—he would still have difficulty getting out of it regardless. She could always release him, but she didn't know how much resistance her opponents had against genjutsu—and it would leave Sasuke vulnerable, especially since she knew he wouldn't be able to ward against it.

She whirled around again as she dodged another attack that was flung at her from the woman, and saw that Sasuke was making hand signs. "Sakura, behind me, now."

She dodged between two lunging kunai and ducked behind Sasuke, ready to cover his back as he requested, but he whirled around instead and put his arms around her; his hands met in front of her nose, and they were clasped in the seal of the tiger. The words 'Katon: Shippuu shounetsujigoku no jutsu' came out of Sasuke's mouth from behind her, and she realized then exactly why he had asked her to come so close.

A wall of flame erupted in front of her, inches from her face, and by the feel of things, fire had erupted all around her and Sasuke—but she didn't dare move her head to take a look, in case her hair caught on fire. The water on her skin evaporated after a few seconds, and soon her clothes were dry; she began to break out into a sweat, but like the rainwater, that too didn't last very long on her skin before it was evaporated. The brightness of the flames became too much for her eyesight, and she closed them, but the light still shone through her eyelids. The fires swirled around her and Sasuke, blazing away relentlessly, the heat enveloping her body, the blood running out of her wound and drying on her skin. She was beginning to feel light headed. How long had they been in the fire?

"How's your wound?" Sasuke asked her, his voice seeming to blend in with the fire itself.

"It's not too bad..." she muttered, wishing she didn't sound so faint, "The fire's a little...hot."

"It won't last too much longer," he assured her, his grasp tightening on her slightly after her weak utterances, "I'm applying more chakra to the fire so that it'll spread over a greater area, and hopefully get rid of them. Two chakra signatures have already gone out, and one is fading."

His voice sounded, frustrated, almost angry, but with himself, not her. Sakura tried to clear her mind to find out what could be irking him, but he did nothing more to indicate what was wrong. The fires still raged onwards, and the grip he had on her did not change.

"One's running, trying to get out of range," he informed her, and Sakura felt a jolt come to her.

"Not in the direction of Naruto and Tokugawa, are they?" she asked, her duty as team leader fixed firmly in her mind.

"No. But we'll have to get him ourselves, he's the one who proclaimed me dead," Sasuke's voice was filled with that same frustration, "I know him."

"So we'll have to kill him if we want Oto to continue to believe that you are dead," Sakura finished, the heat a little more bearable now that she was used to it a little; she felt him nod. She paused, "What is this technique?"

"The hurricane inferno technique," he told her, "A manipulation of some of the Uchiha Clan's fire ninjutsu."

"You never practiced this when we were training," she said with a small smile, and she could somehow tell he was smirking, "Why are the fires so close to us?"

"All hurricanes have an eye in the center of the storm," Sasuke told her, the roaring of the flames blending seamlessly with his voice, "We are standing in the eye of this storm, one that is barely big enough to accommodate two people."

"I can tell," she replied, feeling a trickle of sweat evaporate as it made its way down her temple—a strange sensation.

"I'm going to extinguish the flames now," Sasuke told her, and already she felt the heat begin to lessen, "If I apply too much more chakra, I won't have enough left to perform any other ninjutsu."

Sakura opened her eyes as soon as the first few raindrops landed on her skin—the sight that met her eyes was shocking. The ground around them, save for the small circle of land in which they were standing, was completely incinerated. The rain hissed where it touched the charred earth, and steam rose around her, obscuring her vision. The charred circle where the fires had burned extended far in all directions, probably at least fifty meters, at the very least. Sasuke released her from his grasp and dashed forwards into the steaming landscape, able to see much clearer than she could. She allowed herself a second to muse at the irony of how the blind man could see what lay ahead better than her.

The last and final jounin had managed to get a greater distance away, but he hadn't gotten too far, and soon Sakura and Sasuke had caught up with him. He was panting, and clutching his shoulder, which had been badly burned by the fire Sasuke had caused, and the odor of burnt flesh hung heavily about him. Sakura, filled with the nature of being a medic, was pained to see a human being suffering, she wanted to help him, but knew that such an idea was ridiculous, and that the act would be rewarded with ingratitude.

"Heh, not bad, Uchiha," he sneered at them as they approached, "I should have expected nothing less from you. But it'll take more than that to kill me."

Sakura glanced at Sasuke, who was standing upright, but looking worn all the same—he had kept the ninjutsu going too long, she knew, and it was taking its toll. Even though he was standing tall, she knew it was just for show—Sasuke was not one to allow the enemy to see him when he was weak.

"Big words coming from you—Orochimaru doesn't chose weaklings for vessels," Sasuke replied coldly.

"That's true, and I wouldn't have dared fighting you back then," the shinobi replied, straightening up slightly, "But you weren't blind then. —Yes, I've noticed, and I sure as hell have no idea how you can move around without being able to see, but you are blind. Your eyes

don't meet me when you talk—and they don't move around when you fight either. But it doesn't matter if you can move freely or not, because one thing's certain, you don't have the Sharingan anymore."

Sakura was tensed and ready to spring, but Sasuke beat her to it; the man was just able to dodge—Sakura saw his cheekbone get grazed by Sasuke's knuckles. Taking this as a sign she could attack, Sakura lunged forwards—only having to dodge again as tongues of flame came raining down from above. Sasuke had used another fire ninjutsu and was bombarding their opponent with it so viciously, that she herself almost got burned.

The man was dodging about performing hand signs, the flames sometimes missing him by inches, but still managing to dodge anyways. She had to do something to help Sasuke, because at this rate, the ground was just becoming littered with flames—and she wasn't sure if he could see the fire. He could sustain an injury if he tried to attack the remaining jounin. The shinobi completed the last hand sign and Sakura saw with horror that Sasuke barely managed to get behind a tree that was outside the fire hurricane's radius. The tree splintered and broke apart, the shards raining down on him—a particularly large chunk catching him on the side of the face and slashing his shoulder.

A grunt of satisfaction came from their opponent, a smug expression playing on his face as steam from the rain on the flames rose around him. Sasuke kneeling on the ground, supporting his shoulder, an infuriated expression his face as blood trickled down his cheek from a nasty cut on his cheekbone. Fury gripped Sakura, but she knew that to lose her head meant to lose the fight, so she let her anger drive her, not control her, and as she charged forwards to the Sound shinobi, she drew a kunai and raised her fist, the chakra becoming concentrated it in.

Oto's shinobi turned his head towards her as she charged with her kunai forwards, her left hand not far behind. The kunai caught him in the abdominal cavity quite neatly, which surprised her—he had grabbed her left wrist, not her right; he had blocked the application of

the genjutsu and allowed himself to be stabbed in the stomach, a potentially fatal wound.

"Sorry, beautiful," he told her with a wicked grin, "Your left hand was trailing a little too far behind for it not to be important."

Sakura glared at him, but he wasn't meeting her eye, which was a problem—she wouldn't be able to catch him in a genjutsu now; if she could only touch his head with her left hand, but her wrist was firmly caught. She applied some chakra to her muscles to enhance her strength, pushing against his arm, trying to touch his head—she dug the kunai further into his stomach to distract him, but merely grabbed her other wrist as well, pinching a pressure point so that a shooting pain ran through her hand. The result was that both her hands were useless, and the kunai was no longer in her grasp.

"Got you now, beautiful," the sound nin muttered silkily.

"You forgot that girls fight dirty," she retorted haughtily, and with those final words, she delivered a swift kick upwards kneeing him hard in the groin.

The ninja double over in pain, keeling over and loosening his grasp on Sakura. It was enough, with a swift motion she struck forward with her hand at the back of his head, which was now completely exposed. She sent the genjutsu forth through her palm, and she felt the chakra exit; her palm touched his scalp, and then an odd sensation went through her. The next thing she knew she was falling backwards, her mind losing consciousness, and the last thing she remembered was wondering what on earth happened.

A/N: Sakura's down! What'll Sasuke do? Have to wait for the next chapter to find that out, now won't we? See you next couple weeks!

Chapter 32

A/N: I have no idea what to say here right now. Oh, I don't like Paris. As in the place...the city. I went there last summer. It stinks...like cigarette smoke. Yuck.

Chapter Thirty-Two: An Awkward Situation

"What did you do to her?" Sasuke demanded, his voice low and menacing, dripping with rage.

He could feel anger vibrating through every fibre in his body; Sakura was lying unconscious on the ground, her signature very faint, bordering on the edge of going out. He resisted the impulse to rush over and attack the last remaining shinobi, who had knocked her out—or that was what Sasuke was hoping he had done to her, and not something worse. He knew better to rush to her side though, even though he wanted to—not only did he not know what his opponent had up his sleeve, but he did not know if the rain had yet put out the fires that he had spewing earlier. The intermittent hiss told him no. He needed to get Sakura out of there, but he could not risk his own safety—if he ended up injured too, then they were both in trouble, and Sakura could end up dead.

There was a bitter laugh from the Sound shinobi, and a pained smirk decorated his face. He was still in pain from Sakura's kick, but he looked smug about his victory nonetheless, "She's not dead, if that's what you're worried about."

"I know she's not dead," Sasuke spat back, his fists clenching tightly, quavering slightly with silent fury, "I want to know what the hell you did to her!"

"Well, it's been a while since you were perceived as dead, so I'm sure you've been out of the loop for a while, seeing as you didn't return to Oto at all. Actually, I'm surprised that you ran back to Konoha—well, no, actually I'm surprised that they took you back at all," was the drawling reply, "You're a coward, Uchiha Sasuke, first running away to Oto, and then returning to Konoha after all these years. I suppose you're just lucky that they accepted you back like a prodigal son."

Sasuke ignored the statement, though it was very true. He was lucky that he had been accepted back—or at least accepted back by people who mattered. Not everyone accepted him back, he knew—there were those in the neighbourhood around the house who would cast wary glances his way as he and Sakura went about their daily duties; those who didn't know him, didn't trust him. If he had been entirely accepted back, he wouldn't have to use the time from this mission to go into his community service hours. But all of that didn't matter at that moment, it was trivial in comparison to the current situation.

"I'm not going to ask again," Sasuke stated icily through clenched teeth, "What did—"

"—I do to her," finished the jounin offhandedly, "You never were one to be distracted long, were you? Well, despite you being out of the loop for a number of months, you would have still known about the Chakra Oscillation Project."

The name struck a chord within Sasuke's memory—there was something very familiar and very important sounding about the name of the project. He must have had some role in the project, or he had helped in some way. Now that it was on his mind, he felt like he knew quite a bit about it, but of course, being able to remember everything right away would have been too easy for it to be allowed.

"Sounds vaguely familiar—elaborate," he ordered; Sakura's chakra suddenly flared strangely and then smoldered. Sasuke felt his insides start—the signature was now very faint, but steady, however

he could sense it running rampant through her systems, and he had no idea what that meant. He had to help her quickly.

"You oversaw the project, but we completed it without you," the jounin replied, and when Sasuke didn't say anything the jounin frowned, "You should understand the significance of the projects completion. But I doubt we would have completed it as quickly if you had still been running it. After you had supposedly died, your position was replaced by Orochimaru's brightest scientist—Karin."

Sasuke remembered Karin—a bespectacled girl who was in charge of one of Orochimaru's research facilities; of course he couldn't remember what was being done at said facility or location of said facility, but the important bit was bringing himself to remember the Chakra Oscillation Project, or manage to get the jounin to tell him what it was.

"Tell me exactly was accomplished upon the project's completion," Sasuke stated with extreme patience, "We predicted numerous results, however when you say that the project was completed, I have no idea what that entails."

"It was the most probable of the outcomes of course—the ability to reverse a person's charka," the response was spoken with an air of mild surprise, "I am the first test subject who can successfully complete the process. I match my chakra to the same frequency to that of my enemy and when they use chakra to directly attack, I match their chakra and reverse it upon them. Their own attacks are essentially used upon themselves; previously we were only able to accomplish the nullification of attacks with this method, but now it is refined."

It was fading back into his memory now—information about the project was returning a little. He remembered overseeing it now, and he remembered that Orochimaru wanted to perfect it before they attacked Konoha; but now they had completed it and along with the fact that the Chuunin Exams were being held in Konoha, the threat to Konoha had increased significantly. There were many blanks, but

it was certain that a message to Konoha was necessary—after he saved Sakura, of course. And he had to kill this jounin, but after he had extracted more information.

"But you should know all this," came the intrusion of the jounin's voice into his thoughts, "You forgot about the Chakra Oscillation Project, didn't you? Otherwise you wouldn't have needed to ask what the completion of the project meant. We were told you were M.I.A., but you weren't really, you were thrown out—and you had your memory erased."

"That is irrelevant to you, because I have no intention of letting you leave this place alive," Sasuke replied, taking up an offensive stance; he knew enough now, he could help Sakura once this jounin was dealt with.

"We'll see about that," the jounin bent down and picked up Sakura's dropped kunai, "You forget that I have your friend here."

The jounin bent down and placed the kunai to Sakura's neck; a fury of sudden adrenaline welled up in Sasuke, and what happened next was almost too quick to realize what happened. Instinctively, Sasuke molded his chakra, and in an instant, four large serpents flew out from his sleeves, soaring forth and encircling Sakura, while another four flew forward at the Sound nin.

It was as the serpents grasped both the sound nin and Sakura, that Sasuke felt a burning sensation erupt on his neck, where the curse mark lay. The technique with the snakes drew a little power from the curse mark, but he had hoped that his own chakra would be able to compensate for the lack of being able to use the mark any longer, apparently he was mistaken, as the snakes that he had around Sakura had now become difficult to keep in control, their heads snapping at one another and hissing violently.

As much as Sasuke tried to recall them, they still swayed against his will, the grasp on Sakura was hard enough to maintain, while the grasp on the sound jounin slipped and the man managed to

disentangled himself from the writhing creatures. Sasuke realized that his chakra would soon be spent if he used additional chakra to regain complete control over the reptiles, but as things were playing out, it would seem he had little choice. If even one of the snakes bit Sakura... Even in the best of situations, the venom was difficult to expel.

Strength left him as he applied the extra chakra to regain control, and slowly, one by one, each snake fell into submission. He pulled Sakura over to his side, dismissing the summoned snakes as soon as she was in close enough proximity to him. The jounin was keeping his distance, eying Sasuke wearily, which was advantageous while Sasuke examined Sakura. Kneeling down next to her, he felt her forehead, never once diverting his senses away from their enemy. She must have attempted to put a genjutsu on their enemy—and a powerful one at that—because she was showing the telltale signs of being within a genjutsu. However, the chakra running through her body was slowly lessening, like she was expending her own chakra on herself—genjutsu didn't work that way though. He wondered if this effect had something to do with the Chakra Oscillation Project.

Determining that Sakura was all right for the moment, he rounded on Oto's nin. He remembered part of the project now, and he knew that the method of reversing once attacks on the user was not applicable to elemental chakra. The irregularities of the elemental frequencies were too difficult to match before actually being attacked—and raw elemental attacks, like his fire ninjutsu, or the chidori, could not be countered at all. He would end this fight quickly and then tend to Sakura, because there was no way that he could let his opponent escape now, not if he wanted keep the mission, and everything else that mattered, from being lost.

Naruto sat crouched in the underbrush, his ears listening carefully for any signs of being followed. There had been noises coming from down the path ahead, and to protect Tokugawa Manzo, he had

ordered that they hid. His hearing at the moment was very acute, the demon fox's senses leaking into him. He was—or rather the fox was—riled from the encounter they had with the Sound Ninja, and suppressing it again was difficult. If he were to look in a mirror at that moment, he knew that his eyes would probably be the same shade of the crimson as the Sharingan, the pupils slit vertically. The whiskered marks on his cheeks were burning too, and they were probably darker than usual.

"Oi, how long do we have to sit down here in the ditch under the rain?" Tokugawa muttered grouchy—Naruto found himself musing that he had grown an extreme dislike for politicians.

"Look you, Sasuke and Sakura-chan are risking their lives to save yours, so don't show them ingratitude by dying because you couldn't handle a few minutes of hiding," Naruto growled under his breath so that they wouldn't be heard.

Tokugawa felt silent for a while after that; satisfied that the point had gotten across, Naruto returned his attention to the road. They had taken the main road, but on the way, they had passed many forks in the path, where there sometimes were other people coming and going. They were far from the attack site, but who knew what other adversaries lay in wait afterwards, stationed in the event that they did escape. Naruto was particularly cautious every time they passed a junction, and when he heard people coming from the path ahead, he pushed Kumo's delegate into the ditch and jumped in afterwards.

The noises down the path turned out to be a farmer herding his stock home in the rain, and the bleating of sheep mingled with the pattering of the rain. Naruto relaxed once the farmer had turned down a branch of the junction nearby, most likely going homewards.

"Do you think those two will be okay?" Tokugawa asked as the farmer was fading from view, the sheets of falling rain hiding the man, "I mean, they're still kids."

"You're being abnormally troubled," Naruto muttered under his breath, then said louder: "Nah. Our first B-ranked mission was given to us when we were twelve—they'll be able to handle it."

Granted, that mission was given to them by accident—not to mention that it was just one jounin and an ANBU, not four jounin.

"Of course they'll just have a little more trouble without *me* around, but they'll be okay," Naruto told the man with a serious nod that didn't look the least bit serious.

"Without you around?" Tokugawa said skeptically.

"Of course! I'm the great Uzumaki Naruto! I'm the one who's going to be the Rokudaime Hokage one day! But they're good enough to manage without my greatness!" Naruto boasted loudly grinning at the older man, trying to lighten the mood.

The older man just rolled his eyes and grunted, seeming reassured that anyone with a lack of Naruto on their team was better off. When Naruto thought Tokugawa wasn't looking, he stole an apprehensive glance down the path; he would take the client and wait at the designated meeting point, but...

"You'd better follow, you two," he muttered in the general direction of his two teammates.

"Did you say something?"

"I said: 'They'll catch up to us in no time, dattebayo!'" Naruto replied hastily, "They'll be fine."

Or at least, he hoped they would be.

Rain pelted down on them, the cool water splashing on their skin. Sasuke was splayed out on the ground, wet earth and mud sticking to him. It had been a longer fight than he had anticipated, but in the

end the fight had been won. Sasuke had been correct in assuming that the technique that his opponent used was unable to block out elemental attacks. And after using a number of fire-based techniques to trap his opponent, he used the Chidori to finish him off. However, his attacks had not come without consequences from being used; the last bit of Sasuke's chakra had been put into using Chidori against his opponent, and even then it hadn't been enough to kill the jounin. Said ninja was lying on the ground a hundred meters away, where his signature was rapidly fading. He would be dead soon. Even though that had been accomplished, Sasuke had used up all his chakra, and now, even if he had wanted to, he couldn't mask his signature, let alone use any chakra to see.

The world was black around him, and the only thing he could sense was the earth and the rain, and the fading signatures of both Sakura and the sound jounin. A few moments passed, and the jounin's signature flickered once more before it extinguished forever, leaving only he and Sakura alive on the battlefield. He was sore all over, and with agonizing motion, he forced himself to roll to face Sakura lay, unconscious and dwindling. He couldn't hear her breathing over the sound of the rain, but she was alive still, so that was all that mattered. A shiver ran down his spine as the cool air blew over him; they shouldn't stay out in the cold, he thought dimly.

Forcing his body to move again, he ignored the aching protest of his muscles as he crawled towards Sakura's signature, mud and wet ashes clinging to him. He hoped she would be okay, he thought dimly as he put his fingers to her forehead.

"Kai," he muttered softly and he felt the rampant chakra within her go docile. Slowly her signature faded into liveliness, but it was barely above the level of unconscious. He shook her shoulders slightly muttering to her, hoping she would awaken.

"Come on, Sakura," he murmured, jostling her shoulders as roughly as his remaining strength would allow, "We can't stay here... I need you to be my eyes. I can't see."

The chakra within her took another incremental step towards consciousness, and a faint utterance followed, "...Sasuke?"

She sat upright, next to him, and paused. He could hear her moving, and he assumed that she was looking over at the body of the fallen jounin. He felt his mouth harden into a grim line, he wished that he hadn't been the one to have to kill the jounin.

"What happened?"

"I'll explain that later, it'll take too much time now," Sasuke told her, one of his hands still on her shoulder.

"Naruto and our client?" she asked after a moment.

"No other presences intervened, and they've been out of range for quite some time," he told her, "I think it can be safely assumed that they are alright."

"That's good," she sounded relieved.

"Are you badly hurt?" he asked, frustrated that he couldn't tell without his chakra senses.

"Not badly—I can walk," she replied, her voice was bitter with the next statement, "But I don't think I'll have enough chakra to heal anything."

"We need to find a place where we can take shelter," he said, shaking his head at her, "You can dress our injuries there. But you're going to have to guide me, I used up too much chakra, and now I can't use my senses."

Sakura was quiet for a moment before she offered, "The teahouse isn't far. We'll get help from there."

She got to her feet and with her help he got to his feet as well. It was a miracle either of them could stand—Sasuke could tell from just standing next to Sakura that she was shaking from fatigue, and he

knew that he was doing the same. In fact, it was probably only because they had each other for support, that they managed to stay upright at all.

Slow they made their way back down the path towards the teahouse at an agonizing pace. The rain was pelting down hard on them, and the dirt road was slick with mud. He could feel Sakura shivering as much as he was, and her muscles probably felt the same as his did, though he didn't know for sure. Also, the faint smell of blood could be caught from Sakura, and despite the fact that she had said she could walk, she hobbled laboriously down the path.

Minutes passed, ticking by slowly counting away time, and soon it became lost to him how much of it had actually passed. He was soaked to the skin by now, mud and small rocks had found their way into his shoes and the thick earth was sticking between his toes. A cut on his cheek was stinging profusely from the rain and sweat that had made its way into the wound. He couldn't really tell, but he was certain blood was trickling from the injury, probably down his neck and under his shirt. Pleasant.

"I see it," Sakura told him, her voice sound more alert than it had previously, but he knew that she was probably still worn out.

Their pace quickened slightly as they headed to the teahouse, and Sasuke could see the quaint little building in his mind, relief coming along with the image.

"The front steps are here," Sakura told him, reminding him about the stairs to the veranda, "Be careful."

He nodded mutely at her words, remembering the wooden planks. The roof hung over them and he was glad to get out of the rain.

"Dammit," Sakura cursed as he stood firmly on the porch.

"What?"

"I forgot," Sakura sighed, "They closed early today and won't be open at all tomorrow. Remember what the land lady said?"

Sasuke closed his eyes in a silent sigh, falling to the ground and leaning on the wall of the building, dimly aware that he was probably smearing mud on it. Listening to the sound of the rain on the porch roof, he tried to think of alternatives; staying in the rain was not an option, neither was sitting here on the porch, and the meeting place she had set up with Naruto was too far. Maybe they could go into the woods and set up a small shelter, perhaps find some dry spot and set up a camp.

He listened to Sakura moving around, shuffling about the porch. Could she make it though? The wound she had received may not hinder her ability to get around, but it could get worse. Would she be able to help set up a shelter? He knew he couldn't be able to do it himself; he couldn't see without chakra, and to get it back, he needed to rest. But he couldn't rest until they had shelter.

Sasuke heard Sakura withdraw something jingling—most likely from her kunai pouch—and after a moment of fidgeting with whatever it was, he turned his head towards her.

"What are you doing?" he asked her, too exhausted to try and guess what she was up to.

"I'm picking the lock open—old fashioned way," she told him in reply, her voice no longer exhausted, "We can't stay out here, and I don't care if it's closed."

Sasuke smirked weakly. "You don't seem to have any problems with breaking and entering," he mused as she worked.

She gave a light laugh, "You should know that by now. You're talking to the person who broke into your house to clean it even though it was unlikely you'd ever return to appreciate my hard work. —Got it open!"

There was an accompanying creak as Sasuke heard the door swing open. Sasuke got up from his position on the floor, his head turned towards the open door, listening for any sounds that might come from within.

"Come on," Sakura told him, taking his arm and leading him inside.

It was dark inside the teahouse when Sakura entered with Sasuke from outside. The curtains on the window were shut and only a dim outline of the contents of the room was visible to her. Things were definitely closed, as the cushions around the table were stacked in a corner, the tablecloths were gone from the tabletops, and there were no indications that showed there had been anyone here for at least an hour.

"Too bad you're almost out of chakra," Sakura commented as she surveyed the room around her, "I almost need *you* to be *my* eyes—it's insanely dark in here."

Leading him inside, she hauled him over to the fire pit, getting him to side down next to it. After instructing him to wait there, she explored around back, where she had seen their hostess emerge from upon their arrival. There was a small kitchen with cupboards, sink, and broom closet; a door led outside to the back of the building on the far wall, and upon unlocking it, Sakura peeked outside. There was an overflowing rain barrel and a relatively dry woodpile sitting underneath the overhanging roof.

Those discoveries made, Sakura looked around at what she had. '*Priorities*,' she told herself firmly.

Heading back inside, she made her way back to the main room where she had left Sasuke, who was still sitting by the lifeless fire pit. His clothing was soaked and covered in mud, a cut on his cheek was bleeding rather profusely. She wondered dimly how the fight had went after she was thrown into her own genjutsu, but she couldn't worry about that now, she had to focus on their survival. She didn't

have enough chakra to heal anything at this point, but she could bandage wounds later. The primary concern was something else.

"Take your clothes off," Sakura told Sasuke, dropping her backpack to the ground, and unzipping the front of her own shirt; this was not the time for modesty.

"What?"

"It's cold, and if we stay in our wet clothing, we'll get hypothermia," she told him, sliding off her skirt, "Keep your boxers on though."

Sasuke paused for a moment at her statement, but in a few seconds uncertainly began to take off his own shirt. She herself was already stripped down to her undergarments, her wet things draped over her arm. Perhaps it was a good thing that Sasuke no longer had any chakra by which to see—otherwise this situation could end up just that much more awkward, but she was too weary to really care by this point.

While she waited for Sasuke, she took the time to examine the stab wound in her side. It was pretty deep—nearly as deep as the one that the Akatsuki member, Akasuna no Sasori, had given her when she was fighting against him; ironic that it was almost in the same place. What made this situation better was that the kunai had not been poisoned, regardless of that, the wound was still bleeding rather profusely, and blood was already running down her leg. She'd have to stitch it shut—she'd have to do that before she lost too much blood.

When Sasuke had shed his shorts as well, she collected all the dirty garments and took them to the back, where she dumped them in the sink after putting in the plug. For a lack of laundry detergent, she was resourceful and threw in some dish soap instead; leaving the water to run, she went in and grabbed a couple of logs from the woodpile. She did not worry about anyone who might see her dressed in nothing but her underwear, because she knew that Sasuke would give her warning if there was anyone nearby. She

wincing as she walked across the kitchen, the logs supported on her one hip; she tried not to aggravate the wound as she turned off the water as she passed.

Sasuke was still sitting on the floor in front of the fire pit when Sakura dumped the logs onto the ashes that remained in the bottom of the basin. He was sitting with his arms resting knees as he assumed a cross-legged position.

"Can you check and see how the backpacks are?" she asked, examining her wound further to make sure no grit from the logs had gotten in, "And while you're at it, can you dig out a first-aid kit? I'm going to see if I can find some washcloths to clean our wounds, and make a pot of tea."

Sasuke gave a nod, but otherwise did nothing to indicate he had heard her. Satisfied that nothing was in her wound, she headed into the kitchen and began to search through the cupboards. The first one held a number of clean tea towels and washcloths; one of the latter immediately was pressed onto the gash in her side. The teapots were a little more difficult to find—but as she searched for where they were stowed away, she found a number of the white linen tablecloths that had been on the tables earlier. Eyeing them, she grabbed a couple, an idea in mind.

"How's the stuff looking, Sasuke?" she called back to the front, hoping that there would at least be something still dry—preferably clothing, since a sense of modesty had begun to return to her now that their situation was getting back under control.

His response was faint—she noted that Sasuke wasn't a person who often raised his voice, "I found the first-aid kit, but everything is soaked—even the sleeping bags."

She cursed under her breath at this information, teetering precariously on one foot, trying to reach a teapot she'd found while holding the washcloth to her wound and keeping hold on the two

tablecloths. Finally managing to pull it off the shelf, she called forwards again.

"Spread everything out around the fire pit and see if you can get a fire started," she instructed, filling the teapot with water. She glanced down in the water below where their clothing was soaking; murky mud-filled water was all that was really visible, and the blood gave the liquid a slightly reddish tinge in the gloom.

"Wet matches," Sasuke stated simply from the front, and Sakura cursed quietly again.

"Just hang on."

Looking around the room, she saw a small box of matches sitting on the stovetop to light the burners. Smiling at this one piece of good luck that they'd had so far, she put the pot on one of the burners and lit it, before taking the matches to Sasuke.

Entering the front, she saw that Sasuke had spread everything out, and was now unrolling one of their wet sleeping bags. When he was done, she came up behind him and draped one of the tablecloths over his shoulders, smiling softly as he jumped in startled surprise; taking his hand, she turned it over and placed the box of matches in his palm.

"Use those, and use the tablecloth to keep warm until we have a fire," she told him tenderly, wrapping the second tablecloth around herself, "The tea won't be ready for a bit, so I'm going to be medic for a bit here. Are you hurt seriously anywhere?"

He shook his head at her, "No. You're more badly injured—tend to yourself first. The first-aid kit is sitting there."

Sakura spotted it, and within a few moments, she had applied an anesthetic cream to her wound and had threaded the needle that she would use to stitch it up. She bit her lip as she poked the needle through her flesh, trying not to wince—the anesthetic creams did not

numb the nerves nearly as well as an injected freezing, and while the pain was dull, it was there nonetheless.

"The wound in your side—how is it?" Sasuke asked after a few minutes of fiddling with the matches.

"It's fine, but I have to admit, it's not something I should be stitching up in this kind of lighting," she replied with a wry smile, and then added hastily, "But I'm doing fine—I've had a lot of practice with this—so take your time with the fire."

Sasuke nodded, and there was another contemplative pause.

"I'm still trying to figure out what happened," Sakura said as she counted the number of stitches in her head, the wound slowly closing.

"Oto has been experimenting with technique that allows the user to match the frequency of their enemy's chakra and reverse jutsu upon them. The project was known as the Chakra Oscillation Project, and was still incomplete when I left," Sasuke replied, striking another match, "I used to oversee it, apparently, but I'm only just beginning to remember. Supposedly it's been completed in my absence. Basically what happened was that your genjutsu was used upon yourself. However your chakra was beginning to expend itself—I don't know, but I think that might have been a result of the jounin's attack."

"No, that makes sense," Sakura said as she tied the knot at the end of her stitching—seven stitches, not too bad, "The genjutsu I used was one that I developed on my own. Unlike other genjutsu, this one uses an exponential amount of chakra—basically, the longer you are in it, the more chakra your body uses to maintain it. It's very difficult to break out of because you don't have hardly any of your own chakra that isn't feeding into the genjutsu to use to break the flow..."

Sasuke had paused again, and was sitting very rigidly; Sakura wondered if he was worried for her, she put on a weary smile.

"Remind me next time not to use it on Sound Ninja," she said with a bemused manner in her voice, trying to lighten the mood.

"It takes a lot of skill to develop a genjutsu to work differently than it normally does," Sasuke muttered to himself, and she gave him a quizzical look.

"Yes, I suppose it does—" Sakura started when a shrill whistle from the pot in the kitchen interrupted her.

She grabbed their muddy shoes on her way back to the kitchen and threw those in the sink too. Ten minutes later she returned to where Sasuke was, with her tablecloth on her back, their wet—and slightly cleaner—clothes slung on her arm, and a mug of tea in each hand. Sasuke had managed to get the fire going, and it was beginning to catch to the logs as she came over. She tapped one of his shoulders with a mug and he took it from her, holding it in his hands as she sat down next to him. She spread their wet clothes out around the fire, but she knew it would probably take most of the night for them to dry. For the moment she was just content with the tablecloth.

"Well, this is an improvement," she commented lightly, her survival instincts wearing off and drowsiness kicking in, "I'll have to mop the floors though, we left bloodied mud everywhere."

"We should head out as early as possible," Sasuke stated contemplatively, his face turned towards the warmth of the fire, "We still have three days before we're supposed to make it to Kumogakure, and if we want to travel with Naruto and our client, we'll have to make it to the meeting point in time tomorrow. If we're too late, we only have one more chance, and it'll be difficult if we try and catch them on the road."

"Hmmm," Sakura hummed in mellow agreement, leaning over and resting her tired head on Sasuke's shoulder. Closing her eyes, she tightened the grasp of her icy fingers around her warm mug, "I hope Naruto didn't run into any more trouble."

"He'll be fine."

"I know he will be," Sakura commented with a smile, "But it's still annoying to run into trouble, even if you will be fine."

"Aa," Sasuke mused, and Sakura felt him put an arm around her waist, careful to avoid her gash as he held her against him.

There was a pause where neither of them spoke. Outer Sakura was too exhausted to pay much attention to the last gesture that Sasuke had made, but Inner Sakura was having a heart attack—albeit a very sluggish and tired heart attack. They were in a serious situation, stranded, cold, wet, injured, and exhausted; this was not the most ideal time to think about how close Sasuke was allowing her to get to him—physically—but regardless, she found herself unable to put her mind within that frame.

"Should we take shifts?" she asked after a moment, in order to give herself something else to think about.

"No," he replied after a pause of consideration, "I don't think we'll run into any more trouble tonight."

"Okay," she murmured sleepily, "Probably for the better anyways; sleeping bags are soaked so we're probably going to have to rely mostly on body heat for warmth tonight."

She had half expected Sasuke to reject the idea, or at the very least stiffen or something to show that he disagreed with this idea. However he did nothing to indicate that he was in argument with the notion—no, he knew how serious the situation was, she told herself, of course he wouldn't disagree. Maybe there had been a change of expression on his face when she mentioned it, but her eyes were still shut, and he hadn't voiced anything, so she guessed it was safe to assume that he was okay with things.

Prying her eyes open, she set her mug down on the wall that made up the fire pit. The tea was keeping her awake, and she needed her

rest, she couldn't let the caffeine keep her up; she set the half-full mug aside. She glanced at Sasuke's nearly empty mug; there was a tealeaf floating upright, poking through the surface.

"Are you finished with your tea?" she asked him, staring at the floating bit without really seeing it.

"Aa."

Taking his mug, she set it down next to hers on the ledge; she'd deal with both of them in the morning. She didn't want to put the effort into doing it now.

"I'm so tired," she mumbled with a sigh, pulling her tablecloth tighter around her. The statement she had made wasn't entirely true, the tea was partially fighting her fatigue, so she was feeling both tired and not at the same time.

"We should get some rest," Sasuke agreed, dropping his arm from around her; Inner Sakura cursed while her outer self merely sat up slowly.

Looking around the room, she spotted the neatly stacked cushions in the back corner of the room, "I think I have an idea what we can use so that we don't exactly have to sleep on the floor."

Twenty minutes later, Sakura found herself lying awkwardly down next to Sasuke on the pillows that the both of them had arranged on the floor to sleep on. The tablecloth was wrapped tightly around her, her hands clasping the front shut in a self-conscious manner. This was no big deal, she told herself, it wasn't like they hadn't been sleeping in close proximity to one another before...just this time they were starting out this way, instead of her migrating to his side in the middle of the night. Not to mention that they were both better covered at home...

'No,' she reprimanded herself firmly as she rolled onto her side, loosely putting her arms around Sasuke to keep warm, 'Do not go there.'

Well, that within itself was difficult, seeing as she was snuggling close to him for warmth at that very moment, the tablecloth loosening slightly from the lack of her grasp. She was sure that her face was probably as red as the tomatoes that Sasuke liked, and she hoped that Sasuke wouldn't notice—she knew that he could tell she was blushing simply by the temperature of her face, that was the last thing she needed for him to know at that moment. This whole situation was for *warmth* ! She knew they would probably develop symptoms of hypothermia during the period of the night if things weren't like this—this was for survival purposes only.

Sasuke put his arm around her again—except this time the motion was more awkward than before—pulling her slightly closer in the process. His hand came to rest on her lower back, and while said hand was on top of her tablecloth, it did not help matters at all. Not to mention that when he pulled her closer, her cheek had come to rest quite comfortably on his chest, where his tablecloth had decided to (in)conveniently slip off.

Outer Sakura was now faced with the one of the more difficult things for her to do when in situations such as this: keep Inner Sakura from having a seizure or dying of heart failure, whichever came first as a result of the situation. Thinking of two different things at once was not a very difficult task for her, in fact it was what most of the Haruno Clan was very good with—having multiple personalities was almost like their clan kekkei genkai—however, having to blot out, or override, one train of thought with another was very difficult.

Outer Sakura was planning the number of hours it would take in order to catch up with Naruto in the event that they did miss the time window that they were supposed to get to the meeting point within; Inner Sakura was busy numbering off all of Sasuke's perfections... alphabetically. Outer Sakura was beginning to grow frustrated—the two thoughts were disconnected from one another, and it was like

trying to get two parallel lines to cross and have one negate the other, but it was difficult as the two thoughts almost couldn't concentrate on the same thing. It wasn't so much the thoughts that were bothering Sakura, it was more the fact that her Inner self might trigger some compulsive action that would make the situation more awkward.

"Sakura?"

All thoughts successfully ground to a complete halt.

"Yes?" she replied absently. Now that her thoughts were at a standstill, it was going to take a great deal of concentration of keeping them there.

"Do you feel okay?" he asked her, his voice soft and almost at a whisper, "Your face is warm—it might be fever."

She felt her face blush harder, if that was even possible at this point. "I'm feeling okay—if it is fever, it should break with sleep."

He said nothing to her, so she focused on trying to get some sleep—which would hopefully keep all thoughts firmly in place. After a few minutes she had gained total control, pushing the alphabetized list of Sasuke's perfections from her mind. Drowsiness was actually beginning to claim her the longer she lay there, simply enjoying Sasuke's warmth.

"Sakura?" he uttered her name again.

"Mmm?" her mind was already beginning to fog with the beginnings of sleep.

"Sing something," he muttered quietly, his voice fading into the sound of the fire crackling.

"Sing?" she opened her eyes a little, mostly from surprise rather than the desire to actually awaken.

"Aa."

"Okay," she replied after a moment, having selected the tune that originated from a box that had been labeled 'music', and was now tucked away in a closet of their home. Softly she began to vocalize the first few bars of the lullaby that she had become practiced in humming in the dark hours of the night. The melody notes brought a peaceful ambience to her, and as she sang, she realized that she was singing in time to the dull thudding that was Sasuke's heartbeat in her ear. As the song drew to a close, the vocalization died down into a soft hum; after the last note died, a gentle silence lingered behind, leaving them both in unvoiced contemplations.

"Sasuke?" Sakura ventured after moment, "Did you ever have to learn anything to do with music while you were in Oto?"

"Music?"

"Yeah... I mean, it is the Village Hidden in *Sound* , after all," she replied, turning her head slightly so she could stare up at the ceiling, "And the forehead protector *does* have a musical note on it."

He was quiet for a moment, then he replied slowly: "As new recruits to Oto, all are required to be taught the very basics of music. However, because I had a different purpose while I was there, I didn't complete the whole program."

Sakura noted that Sasuke had been most forthcoming with his past in Oto over this mission, whereas before when she had asked him, he had been very blunt—he made it clear that he did not want to speak of it. She wondered if the reason that he was being so open about it now was because so much was at stake, or if he was beginning to remember more. However, this bit of information seemed to be headed towards his own personal life in the Village rather than information on plans, plots, and schemes of the Sound Village. Perhaps that was why she found herself hanging onto every word Sasuke spoke, as if afraid he would stop if she did not listen so intently.

"I learned a few things—I was taught a few songs, learned to play a simple melody on a wooden flute, and could carry a tune if required," he continued, "But everything I learned is mostly gone. I remember the course, but I don't remember much that was in it. I was taken out of the program after a month, and I wasn't required to apply any of it over the next couple of years. "

"...There must be something you remember," she murmured to him, "Please let me hear something. I won't laugh or anything—I promise."

"You want me to sing?" his voice sounded vaguely amused.

"Well, you don't have to...you could just hum or something," Sakura replied, her lip twitching from bemusement.

He didn't say anything for a moment. "There was one song... It got stuck in my head a lot... I don't remember the words but..."

He trailed off and let the silence linger for a moment, and then he cleared his throat. A low uncertain hum followed, and it wasn't long before Sakura recognized the tune. It could be quite easily be labeled as the favourite song of her childhood. Without hesitation she joined in, filling in the words that Sasuke had forgotten long ago.

" *Sakura sakura*

Yayoi no sora wa

Miwatasu kagiri

Kasumi ka kumo ka

Nioi zo izuru

Izaya izaya

Mini yu kan. "(1)

When they were finished, Sakura closed her eyes again, her thoughts in a state of wonder more than anything else.

"I'm not very musical," Sasuke told her bluntly.

"I loved it," she replied, a smile coming to her face, adding silently, *'More than you know.'*

Sasuke held onto Sakura tightly long after she had already fallen asleep, his fingertips idly playing with the ends of her hair. He had almost managed to forget that song, he noted with a hint of wry humor, now it would most likely be stuck in his head again. Sakura sighed in her sleep and shifted slightly. Then again, maybe it wouldn't get stuck.

He remembered distinctly the first time he had heard that song; he felt like someone had taken a hold of his insides and given them a sharp twisting squeeze. Over the months that had followed, he had it stuck in his head, and he would catch himself humming the tune. That had been dangerous; he shouldn't have been so careless, because if Orochimaru had heard him, and made the assumption that he still cared about those he had left in Konoha, it would have put them in danger.

But that was what it had been all along, hadn't it? He had cared about them—cared enough to stop himself from humming in order to maintain their safety. Cared enough to still have the song stuck in his head even when all he wished was for him to be able to forget his time in Konoha. The reason that the song had gotten in his head so much, and irritated him so endlessly...he knew why now. He had been reminded of everyone he had left behind, more specifically a pink-haired kunoichi who had begged to come with him. And it was in the loneliest hours of his time in Oto that it came to his head—the only time when he wished he actually could have brought her with him, because he did not think he could tolerate the feeling of being alone much longer.

But in the end, he would always convince himself that he did not need anyone, that he could do this alone. And even though he had refused to acknowledge it then, he was willing to recognize the fact now: he had missed her.

A/N: Bah! Finally! From the time Sakura regained consciousness to the very last sentence of this chapter, I've had that part written down since May! Took four months before I got to the point where it happened. Glad that's finally out. This has been a chapter from your friendly neighbourhood fan service. Thank you and please enjoy your day! (And review while you're at it :p)

(1) The romanji lyrics I got from sheet music I had for the melody. Some of the romanji looks completely wrong to me, so if there are any Japanese speakers, who want to correct that, please tell me! Arigatou gozaimasu. **Edit 12/05/07:** A special thanks to kanan com for correcting these lyrics for me.

Chapter 33

A/N: Wow, the response to the previous chapter was really positive. 102 reviews for that chapter alone—bringing me up to a total of 1700 exactly. A lot of people loved it and told me over and over again that they liked the fluff, liked the song, liked that Sasuke missed her.

I feel really honored when people who were skeptical at first to read this story actually do, and end up loving it. I also feel honored when those who don't review often go out of their way to review to tell me that they thought it was worth reviewing for. A few times on deviantart, I've had people ask me: are you the person who writes *Blind* on fanfiction(dot)net? It makes me feel happy to be able to tell them truthfully, yes. I've had people tell me that I'm a goddess, that I should rule the world, that I should take over Naruto for Kishimoto—it makes me laugh, but I also feel flattered. I've made people laugh, I've made them cry, I've made people sit on the edge of their seat dying to know what happens next, I've made people squeal in delight upon seeing the newest chapter out—and every time people tell me this, I sometimes find it hard to believe that my writing has had such a profound affect on people.

When I first started this story I thought I was taking a huge risk, I didn't know how people would react to a blind Sasuke, but this story has exceeded all expectations that I ever had. Thank you all so much, I'm glad that you all love this story and I hope many of you will be able to sit back and say: "that was a good story" when it ends.

I'm sorry, I'm feeling really touched at the moment, getting all emotional and whatnot. I wonder if this is how authors feel about their novels when they become New York Times bestsellers. Now, on to business. A number of people asked me what the lyrics of the song meant, and I personally didn't feel that the translation with my sheet music was an accurate one, so I wikipedia-ed it. I feel that this is a better translation, and I found another verse to it that I never knew existed! Anyways, here's the translation:

Cherry blossoms, cherry blossoms,

Across the Spring sky,

As far as you can see.

Is it a mist, or clouds?

Fragrant in the air.

Come now, come,

Let's look, at last!

Though I'm pretty sure that everyone knows this by now, I'm just saying it for those who don't: sakura means cherry blossom.

Chapter Thirty-Three: In Cold Blood

Sasuke woke first the next morning, and it was quite understandable that he felt stiff all over his body. The pillows Sakura had gotten for them to sleep on were not thick enough to allow the floor's hardness to entirely escape his notice. He was still feeling exhausted, but he felt that he had enough energy to last the day. Opening his eyes, he projected chakra all about him, the night's rest providing the chance for his reserves to restore themselves.

The room was just as it had been yesterday, save for the fact that things were a little messy from his and Sakura's makeshift camp. Belongings were scattered about everywhere, and as far as he could tell, the fire he had managed to build, blind, had gone out a while ago. (If there was the scent of smoke in the air, sensory adaptation was making impossible for him to tell it was there.)

He was lying on the ground near to the fire pit, the two tea mugs still sitting on the rim, and Sakura was lying next to him, where she still

slept deeply. The tablecloth Sakura had offered him was twisted over his body from sleep—he must have been uncomfortable. During the night he didn't usually move around enough to get tangled up in his blankets—in this case, tablecloth.

Sakura on the other hand seemed to be sleeping very well, and as far as he could tell, she hadn't moved at all during the night. Her tablecloth was draped lightly over her, but it was looser on her than his had been on him, most likely working better as a blanket for her than his had done. Not that the tablecloths were big enough to cover either of them enough to begin with. Even though Sakura may have her tablecloth wrapped more comfortably on her, it had slipped slightly during the night. Where before said tablecloth had separated them, Sasuke could feel her skin against his.

By the time it had registered to him that he was—in a sense—staring at a sleeping Sakura, who was wearing nothing but her undergarments and a tablecloth, it was too late to rid the image from his mind, even if he focused all his chakra at the ceiling instead. Their skin contact wasn't doing much in the way of removing the image in his head either. Even though he tried to banish the image from his mind, it stuck, entirely against his will.

Well, she'd kept in shape, that was for sure, Sasuke found himself reluctantly observe as the image stayed lodged in his mind; her body was lithe and slight, he noted for the first time. He hadn't really noticed before, but Sakura was...how could he put this...she could be aptly called attractive. Her body was what many considered 'ideal.' He supposed that he probably hadn't noticed before because her clothing didn't show off her figure that much—in contrast to when they were younger, Sakura dressed in more loosely fit clothing around the house. In comparison to when they were kids, she had worn tighter-fit clothing to try to appear appealing in Sasuke's eyes. That was no longer the case, it seemed.

It wasn't until the beginning of this mission that he had seen her in the tank top, short shorts and skirt, but that was understandable—having less fabric in a shinobi's clothing provided fewer handholds

for ill wishers. Sakura was merely being prepared—he knew that. And while she had told him that she still loved him, if she was making any effort at all in trying to catch his attention, she was taking the approach of winning him over through her character, rather than appearance. That was if she was trying to win him over at all—even if she loved him, she might have accepted the fact that he may never return her feelings.

Not that there was anything wrong with wearing modest clothing, but in Sasuke's opinion, she did have the figure that could be shown off. Her body was slim and fit, her legs would cause any regular man to do a double take, and all her curves had developed to proportions desirable to most men. Her hipbones were angular, yet slender, and her breasts—while slightly smaller than the average woman's—complimented her soft curves. She would be very attractive in the eyes of the average man, and Sasuke was starting to feel a little more average than he was used to.

He abruptly ground his thoughts to a halt; this was no way to be thinking about any woman who was his friend—Sakura in particular. He was currently uninterested in women, and even if he was paying more attention to them, he was an Uchiha. Uchihas, he reminded himself, were above the earthly desires tied to being attracted to a woman by physical appearances alone.

Sasuke felt the back of his neck get warm and he knew that he was over thinking things. It was probably best to stop projecting chakra entirely; and probably good to stop thinking entirely too, if he could manage that. He was willing to admit that Sakura was attractive, but he was not willing to admit that Sakura was just a little bit attractive to *him* .

He let go of her in order to dampen the strange feeling developing in his chest—it was a similar feeling to that of the one Sakura made him feel on a regular basis, the one that he could never truly decipher—however, this time the emotion felt more...awkward. He didn't like awkward.

Sensing no change in her dormant chakra signature, he rolled onto his back. He wished he knew what time it was. There was a clock ticking on the wall, but it had a plastic protective cover over the face, and the only image he got was a blank surface. What this place needed was a clock that lacked the protective covering—one where the hands would be visible to him. But of course wishing didn't help anything.

He strained his hearing and focused his attention to the noise outside the teahouse. It was still raining; the gentle rhythmic drumming on the building made it impossible to hear the telltale signs of morning. Birds would sing at dawn, but if it was raining, or foul weather, they wouldn't normally sing. And if it was night, they would be sleeping, so the weather nixed his only other indicator of the time. He supposed that it was possible to try and detect the chakra of the birds in order to determine whether or not they were awake, however it required much more energy and concentration. Additionally, once attuned to picking up the life signs of lesser creatures, they were much more easy to pick up, thus becoming a distraction from human signatures. It probably wouldn't be a good idea.

It seemed that if he wanted to know the time, he would have to wake Sakura. Maybe waking her up would quell the awkward tumult of emotions in his stomach. The information of his surroundings came pouring in again as he activated his chakra. He hesitantly reached over to where she lay and tried very hard to ignore the present situation. He was reaching out to shake her gently by the shoulder, but when his fingers brushed her smooth cool skin, he became more painfully aware of the awkwardness of the situation. He retracted his hand, pausing to steel his mind. Last night hadn't been a problem for him—he had kept his mind focused on the need for survival; why was it slipping now? Again, with a toughened resolve, he reached her shoulder, grasping it gently, but shaking her firmly.

"Sakura," he called her name as he sensed a flicker of change in her unconscious state.

"Hmmm?" she was still half-asleep, "Whahizit?"

"What time is it?" he asked; it was after he realized he was still holding onto her shoulder, that he let go of her. The back of his neck grew slightly warmer.

She rolled over to look at the clock on the wall—the same clock he had been disgruntled about earlier. She couldn't have barely glanced at it, but she must have seen something, because she sat up abruptly, her chakra signature flaring to life violently, the tablecloth falling from her shoulders. Sasuke dropped his senses faster than a rock and turned his face away from her—however Sakura didn't sound like she had noticed this.

"We overslept!" she exclaimed and the floorboards creaked as she leapt to her feet, "We'll have to hurry if we want to hope to even catch Naruto and Tokugawa! We should have left an hour and a half ago!"

She was talking really quickly, and he could hear her running across the room, muttering curses to herself after she had finished explaining—vaguely—what time it was. He was going to ask her again for the exact time, but he never got a chance to, as a wad of fabric caught him in the face.

"Hurry up and get dressed," was the only warning he got before another bundled hit him on the shoulder. Assuming that Sakura had just thrown his now dry clothing at him, he quickly activated his senses in the event that she threw his shoes at him. That wasn't the case, as Sakura was finishing up getting dressed herself, the zipper on the front of her shirt making a smart zipping noise before she bolted to the back room. The sound of running water could be heard shortly afterwards.

Day eight. Just a day and a week after they left Konoha. The weather had improved, and now the sky was an ugly overcast gray instead of the black torrential storms of yesterday. A bitter wind bit

down the path, drowning out most sounds, barely masking out the sounds of the squishing mud beneath their feet. Sakura cast a side-glance at Sasuke, who had his hands in his pockets. To prevent moisture from rubbing on each other's clothing, the two of them decided that no contact would be best to keep them dry. Not that it really helped any—her clothes were still damp from yesterday, even though they had been out all night to dry.

She remembered that Sasuke told her that he didn't like dampness—she wondered if that had anything to do with the subdued mood that he had been in ever since they left the teahouse. Glancing over at him, she saw that his face was stoic, blank—something was definitely eating at him, but she had a feeling it wasn't the weather. What it could possibly be was beyond her, but she knew that he wouldn't say anything unless he was asked—and most often, he didn't want to be asked. She could respect that, but she decided then that if his mood didn't improve by the time they stopped again, she would indeed ask him.

They had left the teahouse in a hurry; Sakura had quickly scrubbed down the walls and floors—removing both mud and blood, dumped the dirty dishes in the sink, put the table clothes on the counter, put away the cushions and left a note for the owners, accompanied by a sum of money which was meant to pay for any extra expenses. Sasuke had packed up their still damp belongings. But despite the rush Sakura had put the two of them through, she had reservations about whether they would make it to the meeting spot before Naruto would take Tokugawa onwards. If they did fail to make it in time, then she would have to make alterations to their travel plans in order to compensate for the extra distance they would be required to travel in order to make it to the second meeting place in time. In order to make it on time, they would most likely have to travel later into the night.

The day that had started out gloomy faded into sunshine by noon, but settled on becoming unpleasant for the evening as they traveled. A cold gale came from the north, reminding Sakura that summer was no more and the weather of autumn held them firm. The Land of

Lightning was much farther north than Konoha, and Sakura wondered if perhaps they would run into snow before they reached Kumogakure; snow by November in the Lightning Country was not uncommon. The prospect of snow was not comforting—while she and Sasuke did manage to get some rest the previous evening, they were still tired; not only that, but both were still sore. Even though she had healed their cuts and gashes in the morning, the bruises were too trivial to bother with, and as a result, the two of them still bore a large number.

That evening they stopped at a larger town, stopping two villages later than Sakura would have normally had a team stop for an evening. It was late evening, drawing close to nine o'clock, before they found an inn to stay the night at. By now they had were within Rai's border, however they were still close enough to the border to merit caution.

There was an onsen in town, and after being presented with suggestion, Sasuke agreed that a soak in the spring would be a good idea. They left their things with the honest-faced innkeeper to take to their room before heading off to the bathhouse. As they were taking off their shoes in the entrance, Sasuke turned towards her, a serious expression on his face.

"Be careful, even here...we don't know who might be after us," he told her.

"I know, I'll be careful," she assured him with a smile, "See you later."

The water felt deliciously warm to her skin, lapping against her body and banishing the cold she had been feeling since the previous day. The icy chill began to thaw as she sunk down into the hot waters so that the water level came up to her chin. She was content to sit like that for a long time—she had felt rather self-conscious while undressing, her bruises catching strange looks from many of the other women who were also there. They probably thought she had an abusive relationship with someone back home or something like that. She didn't stay long.

Her mind wandered many paths as she got dressed again, worry for Naruto coming to mind. Even though Sasuke had said that there had been no intervention as he and Tokugawa made their escape, she couldn't help but be worried for him anyways. She knew that if she hadn't ordered him to go ahead, he wouldn't have left them behind—not in a million years. She wondered what his reaction had been when he realized that they would not be meeting up with them today. She wondered if he had freaked out, or maybe he had sat in place for a number of hours afterwards before deciding to move on again. The rendezvous spot had been devoid of both Naruto and client, so he had in fact moved on to the next one. But had Tokugawa needed to convince Naruto to move? Did Naruto think that she and Sasuke had died? Would he decide to turn around and come back? She wouldn't be surprised if he did.

Sighing she plodded back to the entry again, wondering what they should do in the event that Naruto did turn back—and missed them...and made their mission a failure in the process...and possibly got lost. Her thoughts weren't broken from their collective path until she realized that she had been scanning up and down for her shoes, only to realize that they weren't there. She turned at a tap on her shoulder, and found her shoes hanging a few feet in front of her.

"Are you warmed up?" Sasuke asked as she took her shoes from him; his expression was still rather emotionless, and Sakura's heart fell. If he didn't have something weighing on his mind, she knew he most likely would have been amused by the fact that she had been looking for her shoes for a while.

"In all honesty, no, not really," she replied with a weak smile, "You weren't waiting long, were you?"

He shook his head, "I left the same time as you did."

A confused look began to descend upon her face; how did he know when she had—chakra senses, right. She shouldn't have forgotten that. She wiped her face clean of confusion. She must be feeling tired, why else would she have forgotten that skill of Sasuke's? Not

to mention one that she had helped him learn; she needed to get a good night's sleep tonight.

"Shall we go back to the inn?" she asked, turning to look at him, "Unless there's something else you'd like to do."

He shook his head and offered her his arm wordlessly; the silence of his reply suggested firmly to her that whatever had been bothering him earlier that day was still troubling him now. She let him lead her to the inn, but the journey was done in silence. Turning her attention away from her concern for Naruto, it became concern for Sasuke. She hadn't seen him brood like this for a long time, namely when he was first becoming used to being blind; it had to be something important that was bothering him. Making up her mind, she decided that she would ask him about it after they had gotten ready for bed—that way, even if he didn't want to answer, he had nowhere else to be to avoid answering her.

The door to their room creaked slightly as Sakura pushed it open, slipping the key into her pocket. It was dim inside, and Sasuke moved past her, ironically having better eyesight than her at the moment, she turned on the light. The first thing that became apparent to her when everything was lit up was that the room housed one queen-sized bed, instead of two singles, like she had asked for. The powers seemed to be against her the past couple of days; she let out a groan of frustration.

"A queen-sized bed," she explained in short order so Sasuke wouldn't have to ask what vexed her; she let out a sigh, "Do you mind? I think it would trouble the innkeeper further if I asked for a switch or anything, and I've gotten to the point where I'm so tired that I just don't care about things like this anymore."

He turned his head towards her and raised his eyebrows slightly, "This is fine. Our incommensurate client isn't here, and this scenario is hardly different to way things are at home."

Sakura nodded mutely, noting mentally that she should have realized that to begin with, however she wasn't particularly paying attention to that fact, but was rather focusing on the way he had worded his response. The way he had said the last bit of the sentence made it sound like he was referring to the house as something they both lived in—both shared—rather than a place where he was the sole homeowner. How long had it been that way, she wondered. When had it first started to become "their home", rather than "his home", or "the house"? She smiled slightly at the warm feeling glowing within her.

"Any preference to which side of the bed you get?" he asked her, a small smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. If Sasuke's eyes hadn't been sightless, she knew the grin wouldn't have reached his eyes. She forgot about their house for the moment, and tried to answer the question without it showing that she was worried about him.

"I really don't care," she replied with a little more than half-hearted gusto, "Here, you wash up, and I'll unpack the wet stuff from our backpacks. And if you're up to it, I can put your eyes through a another session tonight."

"I thought you said you were tired," he replied in a completely casual manner—he was pretty good at hiding things if he wanted, she noted, but she wasn't entirely convinced.

"If a medic ninja ignored her duties as a healer whenever she was tired, a number of people I know would most likely be dead—for instance, you," she replied lightly, an uplifted mood mixing with her concern, "Unless of course, you're declining my offer."

"Only if you interpret it that way."

"Then I won't," she grinned in reply, studying his face subtly. She wondered, as she looked at him, if his senses were activated at that moment—if he could see the smile on his face—or if at the moment, just like his eyes, he was blind to see how much she really cared.

Twenty minutes later, Sasuke found his head resting comfortably in Sakura's lap, facing the ceiling, but not seeing it; his senses were shut off. Sakura was smoothing his hair away from his face so that she could more easily place her fingers on the same points that she always rested them on. This time however, he could sense that she was delaying for some reason.

"You used to be good at hiding when something was bothering you," she said finally, her voice kind, but apprehensive, "Or maybe it's the same, but I'm better at noticing. ...Something's been on your mind, Sasuke. Are you alright?"

He stiffened slightly at the confrontation, he was not used to being asked about how he felt, or if something was bothering him. She was right, either he wasn't good at hiding his emotions anymore, or she had become more perceptive. Instinctively he became wary; even though she had many serious conversations with him, she didn't usually ask him first, he would eventually break whatever he was feeling to her when it became apparent to him that his behaviour was causing her worry.

"I'm—" he started to say, but then caught himself; his response was an automatic response. He did not like to be cornered like this, no means of escape not to answer. He had intended on saying 'I'm fine', but he knew he wouldn't be answering honestly. She trusted him so much, much more than she probably should, didn't she deserve some honesty from him? "I don't know," he said finally.

"Do you want to talk about whatever is bothering you?" she asked tentatively; she removed her hands from his face as she pressed her question further, as if her hands were an intrusion, "It doesn't have anything to do with the circumstances of last night, does it?"

"No," he responded quickly, a frown coming to his face. Was that really what she thought? That something as trivial as that was bothering him? "Sakura, there was nothing either of us could have done to better the situation. Don't dwell on it—I'm not."

"Oh," she said meekly in response, and after another beat of silence, her hands came back towards his face. Instead of smoothing his hair out of his face again, they merely rested on either side of his head, where they cradled it.

Another beat of stillness. "Four people are no longer alive today because of me. I killed them."

He could imagine the expression on her face, it was one of mild surprise, perhaps a little confusion, and she would be biting her lower lip uncertainly. He mused over the fact that they had come to know each other so well that she could better understand what he was feeling despite not showing it, and he could imagine what her expressions would be without having to see it, he could predict her. He knew for a fact that he wouldn't have been able to do that a few years back.

"You know, Sasuke, every time we go on missions, there is always the risk that someone is going to die," she said finally, her voice solemn; Sasuke heard the cry of a single crow outside, "As shinobi, we are aware of that risk, and must meet it—either that, or turn in our forehead protectors. You know as well as I do that sometimes it comes down to kill or be killed, and even though Konoha strongly believes in preserving people's lives, friend or foe, we sometimes have to what we must in order to succeed in the missions we are given. I don't like to kill people—I'm a medic—but on a mission, I have to force my perspective from one where I must protect human life to one where the completion of the mission is the highest priority. I know how hard it is, to take the life of another, particularly when you know that your opponent had family and friends who will never see them again. I'm guessing that you knew our opponents from yesterday—they seemed to know *you* —and I can't imagine what it's like having killed someone you know, were once friends with...cared about."

Her words hit a tender spot, not because her words were true when spoken in relation to the Sound shinobi they had fought, but because he was reminded of someone else when she spoke those words.

She said she couldn't imagine what it would be like to kill someone you knew, were once friends with, and cared about—neither did he... but he had been close. He thought of Naruto, and their fight at the Valley of the End; about how close it had come to ending badly. If things had gone differently, where would he be now? Definitely not on a mission with Team Seven, accepted and welcomed back by the two people who mattered most to him. Would he have killed Orochimaru if Naruto had died? Would he have killed Itachi? And if he had, then what? Where would he go? What would he do? To kill someone you cared about... It would have broken something inside of him if he had killed Naruto, he would have never been able to live with himself afterwards.

"You misunderstand, Sakura," he said after awhile, pushing his disconcerting thoughts aside for the moment—they would most definitely come back to haunt him late at night, "Those who died today were blessed with death, something that they deserved to have. If not for the reason of working for Orochimaru, then they earned it by simply being subject to his experiments. Almost all who are from Sound have been genetically altered or tested upon; the hours of experimentation, the injections, painful procedures—they are better off now than they were back in Oto. Maybe they will finally find the salvation that they went to Oto to obtain, but never found, who knows?

"No, you misunderstand when I say that I killed them. The fact that is that *I* was the one who killed them, *I* have their blood on my hands, and *I* must take responsibility for dealing with the stains. I do not regret them dying, but I do regret that I am the one who had to kill them," he told her, trying very hard not to put the frustration he was feeling into his words; she wanted to understand, he would make her understand, but not by venting his frustration on her, "During my time at Oto, I never killed a soul. Not one person—never on assignments, not when I was sent on assassination missions, not even when I was plotting means of escape did I ever incorporate the idea of having to kill someone in my way. For the past three years, my record has been spotless...until now."

There was only a small pause in which she most likely composed herself again—there was no way that that had been the answer she was expecting. After all, he had been so ready to kill Naruto three years ago, so why would he bother to keep any, less significant, person alive? She probably thought that he had done a number of dirty deeds for Orochimaru, when in fact—if anyone had died, it hadn't been him who killed them, and if he had been in charge of any missions, he had ordered that no vital spots be hit.

"If you don't mind me asking," she started, her words slightly uncertain as she spoke, "Why was it so important to you that you never killed anyone? –Not that I'm saying that it's not respectable that you didn't kill anyone, it's just that I guess I expected that some people would have died by your hands in three years time."

His throat constricted slightly as he tried to form the words. He knew that this question had been coming, so why was it so hard for him to tell her all of a sudden? He knew the answer; it was so simple, yet it meant so much. How could he convey it without meaning lost? How could he explain everything to her without using any words? He wanted her to know—yet he didn't want to tell her. He wanted to give her the message, without using the words. And he knew for a fact that it was impossible.

"I was saving my next kill...for Itachi."

"...I guess I should have expected that. ...I," she started, but then seemed to change her mind mid-sentence, "Thank you for telling this to me, Sasuke. I think I understand—a little—now. I don't entirely know what to say, though, because I can't fully understand yet, but all I can say is: if those shinobi from Oto are better off dead than going back, I don't think what you did was entirely wrong. I think that kills done in cold blood produces the only kind of blood that can stain one's hands."

Killing in cold blood—to kill someone without a reason or moral purpose. Was she right? Was that the only time when blood could stain one's hands? He would have liked to think so, because then,

by that definition, his hands would still be clean—however, that didn't make the near misses inexcusable. What he did to Naruto in the Valley on that fateful day—that would have been a death done in cold blood.

"If you killed someone who killed in cold blood, is that in itself killing in cold blood?" he asked her, rather impulsively, "Or would that be justifiable?"

"I think that's a matter of perspective," she replied in good measure; he could tell she was answering carefully, thinking, "Whose choice it, really, to decide who gets to live or die? Ours? God's? You'll always have to vindicate yourself to those who don't agree with your decision, or else to them, you will have blood on your hands."

He was silent for a long time after that statement, and when he didn't respond, Sakura moved her hands from the side of his face and place her slender fingers on the different points around his head. The steady flow of chakra came shortly afterwards, and the fuzzy distortions of his thoughts and the lapse of control began, which meant that all the restraints on thoughts he had been barricading off—like his guilt for almost killing Naruto—was set loose on his mind. Another thought also crossed his mind, one that he had been unwilling to even think before.

"Sakura? Would *you* hold it against me if I killed someone who killed in cold blood?" he asked hazily—something he wouldn't have done if not under the influence of chakra.

Her response registered dimly in his mind, and it was a few seconds after she'd spoken that he finally realized she'd answered. "...No."

It was a few hours later that Sasuke found himself waking up from the sleep that he inadvertently fell into. The chakra was gone from his head, and Sakura's fingers were missing from his skin, but his head still rested in Sakura's lap. His mind was still clouded and

blurred, but he knew what had happened—it wasn't the first time that it had happened.

Sakura had passed out from over-expenditure of her chakra. He would be concerned in the morning, probably give her a stern comment about it, tell her not to waste so much energy on him, and then start packing, considering the matter closed. But at the moment, he wasn't thinking entirely clearly, his mind fuzzy with all the emotions he had felt rush in when the floodgates of control had opened. He felt the need to be with someone, to be close, to feel safe—assured.

He didn't think to activate his senses as he sat up slowly, rolling unhurriedly onto his stomach on the bed. Blindly he crawled across the covers of the bed, feeling his way across the fabric until his hand brushed one of Sakura's fallen ones. A faded smile twitched at the corner of his mouth as he moved next to her; his one arm encircled her waist and he pulled himself closer to her, burying his face against her neck.

As long as she was the one who never resented him, he thought to himself as he let sleep grasp him again, he could deal with the wrongs he'd done. He could feel vindicated.

A/N: Bah! Hardest Chapter to write for a long time. I blame the lack of Sasuke in Shippuuden :(I can't keep a firm grasp on the understanding of his character if he's not around. (Kicks the Sasuke and Sai arc) Hurry up and get here already. (grumbles) And I don't really care about Jiraiya in the manga right now—I want to find out what happens to my son. ;;

Revision Notice: Writing some later chapters, Konan becomes more and more involved. And I've decided to go back and rewrite the beginning parts. From this point on, not many people knew her name at first, and the nickname "Flower-chan" was given. Even after people found out her real name, some still called her by her nickname—Deidara for instance, and Nariko, who doesn't know her

by anything else. I'm finding it hard to write "Flower-chan" in the descriptions, because I find myself typing "Konan" instead. I've removed the whole "Tsutsujiko" thing too. So sorry for any confusion to senior readers; and new readers who don't know what I'm talking about, forget about it. The chapters that have been revised are chapters: Twenty-two, twenty-three, and twenty-six. For those of you who would like to reread them.

Chapter 34

A/N: Sorry about the late update guys. Posting after midnight on Wednesday. It's just that it was the last day of exams, so I went out for dinner with a bunch of friends from Japanese class and then we went and saw a ballet. And then I had to rescue a friend when her bus didn't come. So, sorry about the delay, but I hope the few hour wait is worth it.

Chapter Thirty-Four: The Value of Exchange

Sasuke didn't know what time it was in the morning when he awoke, but he knew that it was because Sakura was already packing that he had woken. She was moving around in the room, fidgeting with who knew what, and Sasuke didn't feel like activating his senses to look. Actually, it had taken a moment to register what was happening around him—his head was clearer, but still it still felt like half of it was made of cotton. Right now, he was trying to remember clearly what had happened the previous night after he had woken up.

He hated memory loss, he decided, even if his kind had nothing to do with Orochimaru in the least. It was then that he swore that even when he was the legal age to be drinking, he would never do so, because losing you memory *against* your will was bad enough. He didn't see why anyone would go out of their way to risk losing it because of themselves.

Focusing his thoughts he remembered waking up when he no longer felt Sakura's chakra coming in at a steady rate. He remembered hazily crawling to her side and falling asleep next to her. Hadn't he wrapped his arms around her, too? Yes, he had—that was alright, that was normal for them. The only reason he was bothering to remember these things was because he was afraid of doing

something that he normally wouldn't have done if he had his wits about him.

"Sasuke, you need to wake up now, if you're not already," Sakura announced from the other side of the room, in a loud enough voice that would have woken him.

He didn't say anything or do anything that would indicate that he was awake; he just wanted to be certain that he had fallen asleep after he had crawled up next to her. There was something else he vaguely recalled just before falling asleep—he had been thinking about how soft the skin on her neck was.

He clenched his teeth slightly; he should not have thought something like that, he should have retained more control over his thoughts. Next time he would not fall asleep during the healing procedure—that must have been the source of the thought. What frustrated him the most about the thought was that he did not know what it was born of, and that he had no control over if they came. Why was he even thinking that way?

"Sasuke, please, up," Sakura said again as she was packing.

"I'm awake," he told her listlessly, opening his eyes to show her as much. But he didn't activate his senses right away; he wasn't finished thinking. First he had accidentally kissed her cheek when Naruto had bumped him, and then there was the inadvertent staring at her yesterday morning, and now this? Actually, perhaps it was because of those incidents that his thoughts became—

His thoughts ground to a halt. Something, outside of his internal struggle, had changed. It had been right when he blinked, something had changed—he could sense that it changed. What had changed though? He wasn't sure...it had only lasted for a moment, a flicker of a change. ...Flicker...actually that would be a very good way to describe it. He closed his eyes for a moment, and the same something changed. He opened them—the same happened again.

' *What on earth...?*' he sat bolt upright activating his senses and turning his head to Sakura.

"Sasuke, what's wrong?" she asked him, once she saw the look on his face.

"Something's changed..." he said, deactivating his senses. Thinking hard. If he was right...he didn't want to think that way though, if he was wrong. But if he was indeed right...

"What's changed?" she asked, alarmed, "Are we in danger?"

He shook his head, not really paying attention to what she was saying right now, "How bright is it outside?"

"What?"

"Outside—how bright is it?"

"It's not bright at all, it's getting close to winter and the sun hasn't come up yet," she replied, her voice laden with bewilderment.

"It's dark outside?"

"Yes."

"The lights are on in the room?"

"Yes." Her voice was becoming more confused with each question he asked and with each answer she gave.

"Turn off the light."

"What?"

"Please, Sakura."

He heard her cross the room, her quiet footsteps hardly making any noise. There was a creak of a floorboard as she stopped, and then

there was a click of the switch as she flipped it. And things changed again. This time he knew what had changed, he could tell now. He couldn't see anything, he couldn't make out shapes or distinguish shades of grey, but something had distinctly become darker.

"Turn it on again," he ordered hurried, and there was a subsequent click. It was difficult to detect, but the darkness had just gotten a little lighter. He blinked a couple of times, just to watch in amazement as it flickered between darkness and the slight light.

"Sasuke, are you asking me to do this because you can see the change?" Sakura asked uncertainly after he sat there unmoving for a few moments.

The smirk that was slowly growing on his lips grew broader as he activated his senses and observed her. She was standing with her hand over the switch, giving him a wary look, like she was afraid that she was wrong or that she had given him false hope of sorts.

"I can see it...I can tell when the light is on, and when it's off," he told her, he turned his head towards her to emphasize his next statement, "I'm starting to be able to see again."

"Oh my...wow! Oh, Sasuke! That's just...I can't describe it," she was grinning ear from ear as she approached him and sat down beside him; he observed her amusedly, "I mean, it feels like a miracle, that you knew would happen, but was worried it wouldn't. And it *did* happen, but you were expecting it, but not, at the same time."

He raised his eyebrows slightly at her excited explanation. Her bubbly look faltered and then she started to laugh.

"I suppose that doesn't make much sense, does it?" she smiled, "Very contradictory."

"Very," he agreed. Studying her face for a moment, he observed as her face faded from overjoyed to a slightly more sober expression. It didn't take long before she shared her thoughts.

"I'm glad that you can tell the difference between the light and the dark now, Sasuke, but maybe we're getting a little ahead of ourselves," she said cautiously, her words sounding carefully chosen, "I've never brought someone's sight back before, so I don't know if I can do any better than this. This may be all the sight I can give back to you, we'll have to see."

"Of course," he replied, he felt his grin falter and fade; she was right, it was foolish to think that this could mean the restoration of his sight. He couldn't count it as a certainty until it actually happened; he had to do well to remember that.

"Will you stop fidgeting like that? It's getting annoying."

"No."

"Then will you at least sit down? I think can stand the fidgeting if you weren't pacing."

"Well, I think I could stand your company if you weren't talking."

Naruto and Tokugawa glared at one another for a moment, and then each broke their gaze. They were waiting in front of a sign that stated the name of the town that was the second meeting point. So far they had been there for about four hours, Naruto pacing while Tokugawa lounged about in a bored fashion, having found a relatively clean rock to sit on. It only took about one hour since they arrived at the second meeting point that they began to get irritated by one another, and each succeeding hour made things worse.

"Look, what are you so worried about anyways?" Tokugawa asked, watching Naruto slowly wear a hole in the grass, "You said they'd be okay."

"They are okay!" Naruto said, glaring at Tokugawa, still pacing furiously, "They're just late and I'm growing impatient!"

"Then you've been impatient since yesterday," Tokugawa replied, ignoring Naruto's furious stare, "They're technically not late until it's past noon, which means they have about another, oh, hour or so."

"Grr! Shut up!" Naruto snapped, "I know, I know!"

There was silence for all of thirty seconds after that, "So...Can you stop pacing now?"

Naruto rounded on the client, facing him with a frustrated expression, "Gah! No! I will not stop—"

"Oh, there they are," Tokugawa said, sitting up straighter and looking down the path. Sasuke and Sakura had just appeared over around the bend that appeared a little ways down the road.

"Don't interrupt me, you old—what?"

Whirling around, Naruto turned and looked where Tokugawa had indicated. Indeed the other team members of Team Seven were there, walking down the path towards the two. Before anyone had done anything in the way of waving hello or even acknowledging the other party, Naruto had dashed forwards and encompassed Sakura in a bear hug.

"What took you so long?!" Naruto exclaimed indignantly once he had let her go.

"Why? Were you worried?" she smiled in return, a mischievous air sneaking in as well.

"That's an understatement," Tokugawa Manzo announced as he ambled leisurely to the reunited team.

"You didn't think we'd die, did you?" Sakura accused Naruto, fixing him with an exaggerated look of insult.

"We're not all dobe's, Naruto," Sasuke threw in for good measure, a smirk across his handsome face.

"Bah, shut up, teme," the fox-faced boy growled in return, sulking. He had been worried, yes, but hadn't he had a right to being worried? "What happened after we left, anyways? You guys missed the first meeting point, of course I was worried!"

"Now's not the best time," Sakura responded, shaking her head from side to side; Naruto wasn't the best at spotting these things, but he was certain that Sakura glanced at Sasuke when she said that last statement, "I'll fill you in when we get to Kumo. Which should be in a few more hours. Let's go."

As the four of them traveled, the path began to rise steeply; the land around them had been rolling hillside throughout the journey, and now they were becoming more distinct and prominent as the trip wore on. The village that Sakura and Sasuke had spent the previous night was nestled comfortably in the valley of the foothills. The terrain had become rockier since she and Sasuke had met up with Naruto again, and while she knew they had been steadily gaining altitude as time had passed, it had become most noticeable here.

Within a few hours they had begun to climb a long road up a mountainside, and the vegetation became distinctly condensed. Thick fir trees grew where once deciduous trees had covered the hills, and the air had become cooler. Tendrils of silver clouds sometimes drifted over the neighbouring peaks, and on occasion, the path ahead. The mountains were tall here, taller than any of the ones near Konoha, however none of them had snow on top, or at least not yet. Though she had never been to the Land of Earth, she had heard that the mountains there were exceptionally taller than the ones in The Land of Lightning.

"I don't know what's wrong—with me, but I feel—tired," Naruto panted on the trail ahead.

Casting a glance around at the group, she noticed that Naruto indeed looked very tired and Sasuke was a bit winded as well; come to think of it, she was feeling a little worn out as well. Tokugawa

wasn't doing too badly though; he was maintaining a leisurely walking pace. She supposed that was to be expected though, as he had lived in the region for a while.

"Your body has adapted to Konoha's conditions," Sakura began, her mind accessing her vast archive of medical knowledge, "Konoha is closer to sea level in altitude, where the air is rich with oxygen. Our bodies need fewer red blood cells to carry oxygen throughout our bodies. However, at higher altitudes, there is less oxygen, so those who live in such places produce more red blood cells to carry oxygen. That's why Tokugawa-san is doing relatively well at this speed in comparison to us. He has more red blood cells than us."

"Is there any way to up the—red blood cells so that—I don't sound like—Akamaru?" Naruto asked, his voice sounding labored.

"The quickest way? Blood-doping. But that takes time to prepare and would be useless to you after a few days—your liver would eliminate the extra red blood cells," Sakura replied, doing her best to keep her voice smooth; if she was just walking, she didn't feel so out of breath, but when she was walking and talking, that was a little more difficult, "Not to mention that blood-doping is illegal if you're going to participate in any competitive events."

She heard Naruto grumble something that sounded like 'lovely' and trudge onwards.

They continued like this for another twenty minutes or so, when they came across a ridge that the path followed. However, even though the path continued onwards, they all stopped to take in the view. The ridge they were on was only the beginning of a number of steppes that rose along the mountainside—steppes that were laden with buildings and structures. Wisps of thick clouds crawled over the village, hiding parts of it at a time, so that it was impossible to see the whole thing at once. The architecture built itself up the mountainside as well as into it, leading up to a large spired building at the top. The building itself was a work of architectural genius, and the shape reminded Sakura a bit of a windswept cloud.

"So this is Kumogakure," Naruto stated in a matter-of-fact tone, viewing the village before them—Sakura knew that he was secretly awed.

"No, this is only part of Kumogakure," Tokugawa stated, passing by Naruto and continuing up the path that would take them to the front gates, "This is the main part of the village. I told you earlier on the trip that Kumogakure is split into a number of villages. This is the main village where events such as the Chuunin Exam are held. All the other villages are dispersed over the country.

"Why is that?" Sakura asked curiously; if they were going to be leaving Tokugawa here in the village, they might as well try and leave on a good note. Perhaps the problem had been before was that they hadn't really spoken with their client about things that interested him. Perhaps talking about his hometown would help them leave on good terms, which would also better serve Konoha.

"It's so that the different clans and members of Kumo's secrets are kept hidden and protected," Tokugawa replied with a condescending air, "We're better at hiding our village than any who has a singular village."

What was that that she had been thinking about earlier? Leaving on a good note? Forget that idea.

"The village is deceptively large, the other side of the ridge opens up into a small plain, and then drops off as sheer cliffs," Tokugawa continued, seeming not to notice that he had snubbed Konoha.

Sakura was silent for a moment while considering his words. Scattering the village apart in pieces may protect Kumo, but she got the feeling that things had only become that way because the main village was at a defensive disadvantage. While building on the side of a mountain with a cliff to your back meant that you wouldn't be attacked from behind, it also meant that you had no where to escape. The village's placing relied entirely on the strength of the shinobi to defend it. Thinking back on how Sasuke talked about a

raid on Kumo, she understood why the Raikage was quick to jump to peace negotiations instead of fighting back.

As she was speculating these things, Sasuke fell in step beside her. He leaned closer to her and whispered quietly to her while Tokugawa whistled tunelessly ahead.

"He lies when he says the village is deceptively large. In fact, it is every bit as large as it seems," he muttered to her, "We're close enough that I can sense the presences on the edge of the village. There are people's signatures in the ground as well."

"Tunnels," Sakura stated, figuring out what he was implying, "A network to keep civilians safe during invasion. Much like the chamber behind the Great Stone Faces in Konoha."

Sasuke nodded, but said nothing more, because they were now traveling up the path that led through the front gates of the village. Tokugawa strode past the two gate guards, completely ignoring their greetings to him. He was rude even to his fellow citizens, Sakura noted with disgust. She was certain to give a warm smile to the people on duty as they passed.

They followed Tokugawa up the winding latticework of paths, gradually making their way up to the main building that they had seen earlier. The streets, having been built on the rocky mountainside, were labyrinthine and it would have been a likely event that Team Seven would have gotten lost on their own. It didn't help that every now and then, thick portions of cloud would sweep across the path, hiding most exits on the sides of the streets—it would be easy to miss a turnoff if trying to follow someone's directions. Sakura supposed that Sasuke couldn't see the clouds and wouldn't have all that much trouble if he could learn the street patterns.

On the topic of Sasuke, Sakura could see out of the corner of her eye, that he was making his way warily through town. And while he could not glance about, Sakura saw his body was tense, like he was

prepared to run at any moment. There was also a tingling sensation that was radiating off of him as he over-analyzed his surroundings. He hadn't walked close to her since they had met up with Tokugawa and Naruto, and used his senses instead to navigate, and his hands had lingered at an inconspicuous distance from his kunai pouch. She could understand why he was so uptight; any one of the citizens of the village could recognize him from the raid here, and if any of them reacted as Tokugawa did, he needed to be ready to fight or run.

"Careful, Sasuke," Naruto warned from the other side of the said Uchiha, "Whatever you're doing, I can feel it."

The tingling of Sasuke's regular chakra stopped immediately as he cautiously reverted back to the masking chakra.

Much to Sakura's surprise, there were guards posted outside the door to the Raikage's building, something that she knew hadn't been done in Konoha for nearly twenty years. In fact, she had come to notice a number of things that indicated that Kumogakure was less confident than Konoha. While she had never felt the need to be armed in town, she saw a number of locals were doing their evening shopping carrying shuriken holsters and kunai pouches. Maybe they were still on edge about being attacked by Oto, but she didn't know how long ago that had been. Konoha had not been attacked since the Chuunin Exam three years previous, and was on relatively good terms with their neighbors—anyone who didn't like them was not often powerful enough to cause trouble. Perhaps Kumo did not have that same luxury.

The guards at the door snapped to attention when they saw Tokugawa, allowing the four of them to pass. Indoors was nearly as impressive as the outside, the ceiling and columns a design of an architectural prodigy. Proceeding straight forwards to a set of double doors, Kumo's delegate led them straight to the Raikage's office.

Sakura had never met the Raikage before, but she had always imagined him like Tokugawa: stout, burley, with a condescending expression, and a deep tough voice. As the four of them entered the

office, she prepared herself to present herself as none other than Konoha's best. It was a bit of an understatement that the man behind the desk threw her for a loop when she laid eyes on him. The Raikage was not at all what she had imagined, if not the complete and total opposite; he was a rather thin man with a thick bushy mustache and had a face wrinkled with smile lines. Unlike Tsunade, he was garbed in the formal robes that the Kages of the villages normally wore; in that sense, Tsunade was much different from the other Hokages.

The man looked up from his papers as they entered, and a large smile spread across his face when he saw all four of them. He got to his feet and Sakura was awed by how tall he was; he was taller than both Naruto and Sasuke.

"Ah! Welcome home, Manzo!" he greeted Kumo's delegate with a delighted expression on his face, "It is so good to see you back after such a long time of being away."

Tokugawa stiffened slightly and wore a very formal expression, "Raikage-sama, it is good to be back. I trust that you are well, and that the weather has been fine?"

"Ah yes, ah yes, absolutely splendid!" wheezed Kumo's Raikage, "We had three glorious days of sun!"

Sakura watched in a stunned gaze as the exchange went on. Sakura wasn't sure what to make of them two of them as they began to discuss the weather fervently. The way the Raikage carried on, coupled with Tokugawa's mechanical and tight-collared responses, she wasn't sure whether this was all an act or whether the exchange was a serious one and this was completely normal. She glanced at her two teammates to gauge their reactions as well; Naruto had a dumbfounded look of disbelief on his face, while Sasuke was characteristically blank—but Sakura knew he was surprised, as he was no longer tense.

After a few minutes of listening to the Raikage and Tokugawa change the topic of conversation from the weather to food, Sakura cleared her throat uncertainly. The discussion ground to a halt and the Raikage turned to look at them, seeming to notice them for the first time.

"Oh! And who do we have here?" he asked sounding absolutely thrilled, "Konoha Shinobi by the looks of it! You must be the three who brought Manzo all the way back here! Welcome! Welcome!"

"Hajimemashite," Sakura replied with a respectful bow, "We are honored to be welcomed into Kumogakure, Raikage-sama. I am—"

Sakura wasn't able to make the introductions as the Raikage cut her off.

"Not at all! Not at all! I am happy to welcome you to this village! I'm very pleased to make your acquaintances! I'm sure that Tsunade sent her very best for this mission! Quite a charming woman, even if she can be a bit..." the Raikage's face fell a little, "...stubborn. But nonetheless, welcome, welcome. Here, have some strawberries."

"Uh...Thank you," Sakura said uncertainly, taking the small box of strawberries that had been suddenly thrust into her arms, seemingly from nowhere.

"Ah yes, ah yes, well, you all must be very tired, I'll have some rooms set up for you to spend the night in. We're a little short on space at the moment, but I'm sure we can make room," the Raikage continued, tottering away over to his desk and ruffling through some papers.

Sakura caught Naruto's eye and he gave her a very puzzled expression. She then glanced at Tokugawa who was still wearing that extremely serious expression. He was taking the Raikage very seriously, even if the rest of them couldn't.

"Yes, yes, you're probably too worn out to discuss your trip now, and I'm sure you'll want a day to rest, so what do we say to a meeting tomorrow afternoon?" the Raikage blathered on.

"Um...that sounds fine," Sakura replied; the more she was around this man, the more confused she became. Was this really the man whose pride was his flaw? Was this really the man who got in a severely heated debated over where the Chuunin Exams would be held? How could Konoha's relations be strained with Kumo when their Raikage was this man? Sakura clutched the package of strawberries in her hands, feeling bewildered.

"Manzo, will you be so kind as to show these fine people to our guest accommodations? And when you're done with that, I'd like you to tell me all about how your trip was. I've heard the sights in Konoha are fantastic at this time of year. I really wish I could have stayed longer," he continued wistfully, "I'm glad you're back though, I've don't know what to do without you here! Can you believe that every other member of my staff are so terrible at shogi?"

"Yes, Raikage-sama," Tokugawa replied with a stiff air, "Please come with me, you three."

Silently, Team Seven trudged out after Tokugawa; Sakura was still feeling stunned, the strawberries still clasped in her arms.

Sasuke stood in the doorframe of Sakura's room in the small house that ended up being the place where they were staying. The house belonged to the delegate's nephew who lived there with his wife and six-year-old son. There hadn't been enough rooms, so Sasuke and Naruto ended up sharing a small office room while Sakura stayed in the guest room down the hall and around the corner. Sasuke didn't really mind the size of the house, it was spacious enough, but what bothered him was the noise and energy whose source was Tokugawa Manzo's great nephew. He was looking forward to returning home to Konoha and back to the quiet manor with Sakura.

His eagerness for getting out of Konoha had diminished, and now he just wanted to go home.

It was nice, he reflected, realization dawning, to have a place to call home to go back to. For three years he had nothing to return to: just another damp hole with a bed. Now it was different, now it was better. He had a home, and friend; things were gaining a little more... purpose.

"Oh, Sasuke, I didn't realize you were standing there," Sakura said from within the room, breaking him out of his reverie.

He kicked himself in his head; he hated it when his mind drifted, he felt like it was outside of his control, like his thoughts were exposed. He felt that people—prying minds—would be able to read his, and he felt that if he didn't maintain awareness of everyone and everything around him in a foreign location, that anyone would be able to read his thoughts. A blank expression was a thing to keep, because it gave people one less way to access his mind.

Not only was his mind wandering disconcerting, but also to anyone who walked by, it would have probably appeared that he was staring at Sakura.

"Come on in," Sakura welcomed him, "I'll be done unpacking soon."

"Just leave it for now," he told her, not moving from his position in the doorway, "We should all go out for dinner."

She gave him a surprised look, her eyebrows were raised high, "Okay...sure... Any particular reason?"

She wasn't getting it, Sasuke noted with irritation. "We've made it this far, we should celebrate."

He hoped that she would pick up on what he was suggesting now, because if she thought that he was serious about celebrating, she didn't know him nearly as well as he thought she did. He didn't want

to tell her straight out that he wanted to talk with the group without being overheard, because if he felt they weren't going to be overheard here, he wouldn't have suggested going out somewhere to eat. However, her surprised look vanished and she smiled knowingly at him in understanding.

"I'd love to celebrate," she replied, turning back to her things, "I'll just be a couple more minutes; where should I meet you?"

"Meet me and Naruto in our room," he replied, and after she gave a nod, he turned and went down the hallway in the direction of the study.

At the end of the hall, there was a chakra signature flickering with mischief, hiding neatly around the corner, holding very still and the owner was being very quiet. The signature was unguarded, and it had run by a enough times for Sasuke to realize it was the small boy, Masahiro, who was standing idly by. This was strange behaviour, as the boy was normally running around and making as much noise as was humanly possible. Sasuke decided then that he would never allow any children he would have to run rampant like that. They would be well mannered and quiet.

"Boo!" Masahiro yelled as Sasuke rounded the corner, clearly trying to scare him.

"You're not very good at hiding," he told the child, who was standing bewildered over the fact that Sasuke hadn't been the least bit surprised.

"I am though!" the boy insisted, beginning to follow Sasuke as he walked down the hall; inwardly he glowered, he shouldn't have said anything, "You know Naruto-niichan? I jumped out and scared him! He was coming from the kitchen and he slopped ramen all the way down his front! And he's the best ninja in your village!"

Sasuke stopped in front of the door to the study and muttered, "Really now?"

"Yeah! He told me so himself!"

' *Figures,*' Sasuke thought, as he opened the door to the room. Naruto was sitting cross-legged in the very center of the room, a book balanced on top of his head and his eyes closed.

"What are you doing now, Naruto-niichan?" Masahiro asked excitedly, pushing past Sasuke and rushing into the room.

Sasuke mentally groaned; would they ever be rid of this brat? And now he was in their room too. He was hoping that Sakura would be finished soon so they could leave.

"I'm doing some super-important training right now," Naruto replied, grinning, but not opening his eyes.

"Guess what, Naruto-niichan! I did what you said—I tried to scare Sasuke too, but he didn't even jump at all!" the boy babbled on, bouncing up and down on his feet, "If you're the greatest ninja in your village, how come you got scared and not him?"

Sasuke was irritated by the fact that Naruto had told the boy to come pester him, but was amused by the fact that Naruto's grin twitched and it looked like he was making an effort to keep it on his face. Smirking, Sasuke crossed his arms and took a few steps inside the room.

"Don't go telling the children you're the best, dobe, when you know that I'm still better than you," he remarked casually.

Masahiro's eyes widened as he turned to look at Sasuke, "Sou desu ka? Sugoi!"

Naruto's eyes snapped open and he bounded to his feet, the book toppling from his head as he pointed his finger at Sasuke, three inches from the Uchiha's nose, "Listen, teme, I'm ten times better than you'll ever be and you know it!"

"Words, dobe, words," he replied levelly, not even flinching at the outburst.

"Well, I'll prove it to you then!" Naruto exclaimed, shaking his finger wildly at Sasuke's face.

"Are you two fighting again?" Sakura asked, appearing in the doorway suddenly.

Sasuke, who had sensed her leave her room and approach, knew she was there and did not react as the boy and Naruto did. Her seemingly instantaneous appearance startled Tokugawa's great nephew and caused Naruto to jump.

"Not at all," Sasuke replied, turning his head slightly towards Sakura.

"Well, then, are you guys ready to go?" she asked, stepping into the room.

"Ready to go where?" Naruto asked, looking confused and dropping his arm slightly.

"I didn't get a chance to explain," Sasuke told Sakura when he sensed her questioning look she gave from behind his back.

"Okay then, Naruto, come on, we're going out for dinner."

"Can I come?" asked the small boy, turning to Sakura and making his eyes really wide. Sasuke supposed he was begging her, but from his perspective—with the iris and pupil missing from his senses—the boy just looked like he was making his eyes bulge.

"No, sorry, Masahiro-chan," Sakura smiled at the boy, "We're going to be busy this evening doing grown-up things. You'll be really bored, and we don't have time to play with you now."

"Phooey," the boy sulked, walking out of the room, his little hands shoved deep into his pockets.

"Alright, Naruto, come on," Sakura ordered, stepping forward. And grabbing a handful of Naruto's (what Sasuke still assumed was orange) hoodie, she pulled him from the room. Sasuke brought up the rear, following closely behind, but all the while, monitoring Masahiro's signature as he went. The signature stopped as it met one of the adult's signatures, and it was a few moments after Team Seven left the house that the signature left the house as well, before disappearing out of range.

"Why'd you have to pick this restaurant, Sasuke?" Naruto complained, with his chin in his palm and his elbow on the table, "We waited for half an hour to get in, and it'll probably take forever for the food to come because it's so busy."

"You'll live," commented Sakura, casting him a disapproving glance across the table.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Naruto replied, stretching, "I don't know why we're celebrating our arrival here. It's not that special a thing."

From where he was sitting, Sasuke gave Naruto a look that clearly questioned his intelligence. Sakura seemed to think the same as she gave him an equally strong look.

"Naruto, sometimes I wonder if you really did learn anything when you were training with Jiraiya-sama."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Naruto narrowed his eyes at Sakura.

"It means, dobe, that I picked a crowded place for a reason, and that we're not really here to celebrate," Sasuke replied, "We're have a smaller chance of being overheard here."

"What are you worried we'll be overheard for?" Naruto asked, seeming unconcerned, "It's not like we're in any danger—we're allies with Kumogakure, not to mention that the Raikage's short a few

shuriken." At this comment, Naruto tapped the side of his head, "He's a joke."

"He is a bit of an oddball, I'll admit," Sakura said pensively, "But we should still be courteous; after all, Tsunade-sama said that we were on strained relations with Kumo lately."

"With this guy? I mean, come on, the guy gave us strawberries, and discussed the weather," Naruto replied with a laugh, "If anything, Tsunade-obaachan is getting senile!"

"Don't talk about Tsunade-shishou like that!" Sakura snapped at Naruto giving him a deathly glare, causing the fox-faced boy to recoil in fear, "And even because the Raikage appears to be a fool, doesn't mean that we should treat him like one. Right, Sasuke?"

"I don't trust him," Sasuke stated, and the way in which he said it caused Sakura to falter in her angry tirade, "You're right, Sakura, we shouldn't treat him as a fool. While he may appear to be that way, he does have the skills and the cunning to have become the Raikage. And Naruto, if *you* can someday become Hokage, then that man can become the Raikage."

"Hey!"

"He's right, Naruto," Sakura said contemplatively, "I can see where Sasuke's going with this. He might seem a bit...off, but is that really how he is? Sasuke's had dealing with Kumo before—even though probably under unpleasant circumstances—but if he doesn't trust the Raikage, there's probably a reason, right?"

"I can't remember."

"But the fact still stands that you don't trust him," Sakura pressed, and turned back to Naruto, "And don't forget that this is the man who was willing to negotiate with Orochimaru."

Naruto nodded, a dark and wary expression on his face, "So what are we expecting will happen?"

"As it is right now, Kumogakure didn't fulfill Oto's request to have the Chuunin Exam hosted here," Sasuke said contemplatively, "It didn't make sense to me at the time, but I think I understand."

"What?" Naruto asked.

"Tokugawa said that it was Konoha's turn to host the Exam—suggesting that they hadn't held the exam for a while. It can be assumed that Kumo held the exam more recently than Konoha, thus Konoha would be chosen," Sasuke pondered, thinking hard.

"I'm not sure where you're going with this," Sakura spoke uncertainly.

"It was clearly Konoha's turn—all the village leaders recognized that, except for the Raikage. Oto would have known that Kumo would not have been picked even if they insisted so strongly," Sasuke explained, closing his eyes and shutting off his senses.

"Then why would Oto ask Kumo to host the Exam if they knew they wouldn't get it anyways?" Sakura's voice came from his left.

"Because Kumo would not be able to uphold their end of the deal and therefore they had nothing with which to negotiate peace. Oto then can still attack the small regional villages and have no reason not to."

"I don't see why we had to talk in such a busy place about this," came Naruto's voice this time, "Other than insulting the Raikage, we're not doing anything that needs to be kept secret."

" 'The Raikage's pride is his flaw'," Sasuke quoted, echoing Tokugawa's words a few days back, "Our client revealed this information to us, just as I revealed my true identity to him. The Raikage still has Oto to deal with, and by the sounds of things, he is still unwilling to ask for help from other villages. It is likely that he'll

still try and negotiate out of his situation, rather than try and fight or seek help. This means that to make up for not having the Chuunin Exam held in Kumo, he has to offer something of greater value than that in order to get it to stop."

"Sasuke... I don't like the way this is sounding," Sakura said with an uneasy tone in her voice, "What could the Raikage offer that has more value than what they asked for?"

"Tokugawa is loyal to the Raikage," Sasuke said seriously and gravely, "When he hears about our journey, which I have little doubt he has already been informed about, he will no doubt try and offer... me."

A/N: Mwahaha! I *am* evil! Things are getting complicated, and it really throws you for a loop, huh? And the spontaneous giving of fruit is credited to the writer of FMA. I love Bradley and the random melon. And then we found out he was evil D:

Terminology:

Sou desu ka? - Is that so? Really?

Sugoi - It's kinda like 'wow' or 'amazing'.

Chapter 35

A/N: Don't you guys love me? I updated a whole week early!!! D: Which means I've fallen behind in my writing again :) But that's what Christmas Holidays are for, are they not? Writing. :p Anyways, I hope you all enjoy this, and belated Merry Christmas.

Chapter Thirty-Five: Fragility

It was the first night in a while that he actually dreamed. He hadn't had any dreams since he had the first memory recovery, which had been a few days ago. However, the dream he dreamed that night was a wholly different kind of dream; it was something he had never dreamed before. It wasn't about his memories, it wasn't about his past—that night he dreamed about something else entirely.

It was nighttime in the streets of Konoha, and the faded lamplight shone a strange pale luminosity similar to that of moonlight. Despite the hour of the night, and the dimness of the streets, they were crowded with people—people with no distinct features, with nothing special about them, just ordinary people. Some of the people Sasuke recognized, as they passed by him, like Yamanaka Ino, Hyuuga Neji, Inuzuka Kiba, but none of them looked at him as they passed. They all wandered about, blank expressions and movements. They all were shades of grey, no colour highlighted or accented their features. There was only distinct person in the monochromatic crowd, and that was Sakura.

She was wandering about the cobbles, and even though she stopped many times to talk to people around her, none would listen to her. Every time she stopped she spoke with a look of desperation on her face, like she was begging for assistance, but nobody would help her—not even those she knew. Quietly, Sasuke approached

her, curious as to what was the matter, wondering vaguely if there was something he could do to help.

"...ease...please, help me look for him," she was saying to a passing Shikamaru, who blatantly ignored her, walking by as if she wasn't even there, "He's missing, please help me find him."

When Shikamaru continued on, she turned instead to the next person, "Help me find him, please. He's missing—I'm so scared. Please."

That person, too, walked by as if she was non-existent. Frowning at this, Sasuke began to push his way through the crowd to ask her what was wrong, but a hand grabbed his shoulder first. He looked back to see who had grabbed him, and gave a start when his own face stared back at him. But it wasn't exactly his face—it was the face of the demon form of the level two curse seal. Grinning wickedly at him, the demon revealed pointed teeth, and his yellow pupils glinting.

"Let go of me," Sasuke stated calmly, though he felt less than calm.

"You are the one who is holding on to me," was the reply.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Sasuke shot sharply, shrugging his shoulder out of his cursed self's grasp.

"You do though," he hiss softly back, "You still haven't let me go."

Then pain burned on the mark on his neck, as the demon spoke, and a hand went to cover it. There was a soft laugh from the demon before it melted away in smoky tendrils, disappearing in the darkness of the street.

"I'm so worried," came Sakura's voice from down the street, "Please help me find him."

Turning abruptly towards her voice, he renewed his resolve to assist her in whatever was ailing her, only to almost crash directly into Naruto. Red eyes with vertically split pupils met his as an aura of rage seemed to radiate off of his best friend, the glare piercing.

"How dare you show your face here again, you bastard?" Naruto bristled in a low growl, "How dare you come back a second time?"

Sasuke again found himself not knowing what he was being told, but the look that his best friend gave him was unlike any he had seen before. Ignoring him, he tried to divert Naruto's attention to something that he knew he would hold in higher importance.

"Sakura needs help," Sasuke told Naruto exasperatedly, "No one else will help her. Why is everyone ignoring her?"

"What are you talking about, teme?" Naruto spat, "Sakura-chan is dead!"

Sasuke's insides turned to ice, "But I saw her! She's over..."

Sasuke was pointing to where he had seen Sakura, but she was no longer there. The people of the streets were still walking by, but it seemed like the pink-haired kunoichi had vanished altogether from their midst. Naruto glanced over his shoulder half-heartedly, as if to give Sasuke the benefit of the doubt, but when he looked at him again, the marks on his cheeks were darkening.

"She died because of you! Because you left her behind a second time," Naruto shouted at him, "And after this, you come back? Even when she's dead, you can't stop trying to hurt her!"

Naruto shouldered past him angrily, and Sasuke didn't try to stop him; he was standing rooted to the spot in shock. Sakura couldn't be dead, he thought with diminishing certainty, he had seen her standing right before him in the streets, asking people for help. He whirled around to demand more answers from Naruto, but he was no longer there. In fact, not only was Naruto gone, the whole scene had

dissolved as well to form the scene of a graveyard. The white tombs rose tall around him, the faces of the pictures seeming to stare menacingly down upon him; the sky was dark. But Sasuke barely noticed—he wasn't paying attention. Instead before him lay something that caught his attention and held it the moment the scene had set into place. , - Haruno Sakura, was carved onto the stone before him. Trembling, he approached the dais and touched the intricate grooves with his fingertips, his hand shaking so badly that he could hardly trace the lines.

"No," he muttered to himself. She couldn't be dead—he had seen her!

Sinking to the ground, he sat on the dais, his back against the cool tombstone as he stared in horror at his quivering hands. How could she be dead? He had seen her; he had seen her alive. Naruto said she had died because of him, because he had left again. When had he left? Where had he gone? If he had left Sakura behind, it was to keep her safe, to protect—

"Sasuke?"

He looked up sharply; he knew that voice—Naruto had been wrong: she wasn't dead. He was right, she was alive, she was right there, right before him, her face filled with such happiness.

"Sasuke, you came back! I was so worried about you," she was smiling up at him, eyes brimming with tears of joy, "Nobody would listen when you were missing, nobody cared...I was so frightened."

"Sakura," he spoke her name, relief flooding into the very core of his soul, "Sakura, you're okay."

He reached out to touch her face, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. Everything was okay, everything was going to be all right; Sakura was here, she was glad to see him, nothing else mattered. But then something happened that caused the icy sensation to plummet down into his gut once more—his hand had brushed the

side of her face, and then continued on, right through her. It was then that he realized that she was transparent, that there was no chakra signature, that there were no life signs to speak of. The world was green and eerie and the first level of the curse mark was spreading over his hand.

' *You haven't let go of me yet...* ' came his own voice from around him, as he realized the world possessed no shadows.

"Sasuke? Is something wrong?" Sakura asked, her face full of concern—a face that he could see right through.

Sasuke woke with a start, breathing heavily, and for a moment he was disoriented. It was so black...his senses. Activating them quickly, the world made itself apparent to him; Naruto was awake as well, lying on a futon on the other side of the room, staring at him.

"Oi, Sasuke, are you okay?" Naruto asked, a dubious and confused expression painted across his face, "You kept muttering: 'she's dead,' in your sleep."

Sasuke paused, and turned his head towards his best friend, making sure that any expression that could be seen in the possibly dim lighting of the room *would* be seen, "Nothing's wrong. A dream. Should a dream bother me, dobe?"

"Oi, oi," Naruto frowned in response, "I was just asking, teme. Geez, you get so grouchy when you're worried."

"I'm not worried about anything," Sasuke lied haughtily, throwing back the covers and getting up.

"Anosa, where are you going, teme?" Naruto exclaimed as Sasuke crossed the room.

"I'm going to get a glass of water," Sasuke replied, closing the door behind him before Naruto could say another word.

The bathroom was directly across from the guestroom where Sakura was staying, but instead of turning left to enter the bathroom, he turned to the right. Slowly pushing open the door, opening it so quietly that he himself, with his intensified senses, he couldn't hear it. He knew that she was asleep even from his room in the office with Naruto, but upon seeing her face with his senses, the clenched knot in his stomach relaxed a little.

Tentatively he took a few steps into the room, shutting the door silently behind him, making sure that if anyone else was awake in the household that they wouldn't see him in there. Nobody could understand why he was here, even he himself was having difficulty figuring out what exactly he wanted, standing in Sakura's room. He sat down on the floor, lacing his fingers together and resting them beneath his nose. It looked like he was sitting in front of the door, like a bodyguard against any would-be murderers.

He sat like that for a while, unmoving in the darkness, and after a moment, he felt Sakura's chakra begin to come to wakefulness. He hadn't made any noise, but she seemed to have somehow detected his presence, and awoken, because the first words off her lips was his name.

"Sasuke?" she asked, turning her head so that she faced him.

"Aa," he replied quietly, not moving.

"What's the matter?" she asked blearily, blinking a couple times and sitting up.

"I couldn't sleep," he replied stoically, and he noticed as a concerned look came over her face.

"Nightmares?" she whispered quietly into the dark room, like the word itself was forbidden—in a way it was.

"Different ones," he replied, shaking his head in answer to the unasked question.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there," she said quietly, turning her head towards the window in the wall to her right.

He shook his head a little, "Don't be."

"What did you dream?" she asked after a moment.

The question caught him off guard. It was like an unspoken rule that they never discussed his nightmares. He had never told her before what he had dreamed, though he had a suspicion that she could guess what haunted his mind at night. However this was a first time that she had even dared to ask the question. Maybe it was because he had said he had dreamed something different that night, or maybe it was because she had never asked before, and this time she thought she would ask. He didn't know what to answer.

' *I dreamed that you died,*' floated across his mind but never made it to the threshold of his lips.

"It was only a dream," he told her, though the words in his head were longing to make it out through his mouth. He couldn't tell her that, he didn't know why, but he simply couldn't. This was the second time that he dreamed she had died—but this time it was as a result of something he had done, whereas last time Itachi had killed her. This time she had died because he had left...left and never came back. But he wouldn't leave again, he wouldn't do that once more—betray everyone who cared about him, everyone who wanted to see him stay.

But could he honestly tell himself that? There was still a very real threat out there, the threat that had killed Sakura in his first dream. His brother. Itachi. And he knew that within himself that he could not live peacefully in Konoha with his friends and his teammates until that threat was finally eliminated—and he knew that he would have to leave Konoha again to do that. Not permanently—never would he do that to everyone again. Not to Naruto, not to Sakura. He would come back, but he knew that he would have to leave eventually...but he would come back.

"It's snowing outside," Sakura said after the silence had blanketed inside the room.

Kneeling on the bed, she moved and opened the window, and the opaque wall that had been there previously to Sasuke, opened up to reveal the outside, where small little clumps of snowflakes were descending down upon the land. Curiously, Sasuke got to his feet and walked over to the window, kneeling down on the bed next to Sakura, gaining a wider perspective from the window. The cool air blew in over the both of them, causing some of the flakes to land on them; Sakura smiled as she grabbed his hand, brushing her thumb over the back of his knuckles.

"You know, despite my name, winter has always been my favourite season," she said quietly, "It creates a world of fragile things."

Twenty minutes later, Sasuke was quietly entering the study where Naruto and he both slept. Naruto had fallen back asleep and was snoring loudly, which was a good thing, in Sasuke's opinion, because then he didn't have to explain where he had been for the past half an hour. But he wasn't thinking too much about Naruto, he was instead thinking of Sakura, about his dream, about his leaving, and how it seemed that the world was always a world of fragile things.

Sasuke could feel the mist rolling over the plain behind Kumogakure as he sat with his back against a large boulder, steeling himself against the chill that was biting through the air. It had snowed overnight, and the thick white blankets covered the county side in strange textured mounds to his senses. He couldn't remember the last time he had been around snow, it was so very long ago; he didn't mind snow though, the usual damp that came with any sort of moisture was sucked up by the temperature, and became compressed into tiny dry crystals. Of course if the snow melted on you, then it was no longer dry, but at least Sasuke didn't feel moldy when there was snow outside. That was why he was content to sit in the shelter of a rock, on the ground where no snow had fallen, letting the puffs of cloud envelop him. There was a—for a lack of a better

way of putting it—dry sort of moisture to the clouds. The area was quite comfortable.

The reason he had come out here so early in the morning was because he couldn't fall back asleep after being so woken harshly that morning; Tokugawa Manzo's great nephew woke—like all small children did—at the crack of dawn, discovered it had snowed, and then ran shrieking around the house declaring the news to anyone within earshot. Sasuke, unaccustomed to such abuse to his ears, woke instantly the six-year-old boy ran down the hall outside their room. Naruto, who wouldn't wake up even if an exploding tag went off under his bed, hadn't stirred. To prevent irritation from testing his patience, he changed his clothes and slipped out before anyone—especially the little shrieking Tokugawa Masahiro—noticed he was up.

He had wandered around a bit before discovering the vast field that lay outside the village walls. He had forgotten that there was a segment of mountain prairie behind the village and upon discovering it, he was more than eager to cross the drifts of snow to a secluded shelter. The cool air kept his mind sharp, and he mulled over the many things that he, Sakura and Naruto had discussed after his suggestion the previous night. Nobody seemed to know really what to do, as they all swapped ideas of what to do, but nothing seemed quite plausible. Sasuke thought carefully to himself—he made sure to always stay three steps ahead of his enemy; he would have to plan carefully.

After a time of thinking to himself in the icy chill of morning, he sensed Naruto come within his senses and make a very cautious beeline towards his position. Sasuke sat very still, unsure of what his best friend was doing, monitoring his movements carefully. When Naruto had come to the other side of the rock where Sasuke was sitting, he paused, and soon Sasuke heard the quiet crunch of snow to match the movement of the fox-faced boy. Before Sasuke could open his mouth and demand an explanation from Naruto, said loud-mouthed ninja leapt out from behind the rock and hurtled a large wad

of snow at him before he could even think about reacting. Incidentally, the snowball caught Sasuke quite neatly in the side the head.

"Got you, Sasuke!" Naruto exclaimed triumphantly, grinning ear to ear.

"What did you do that for, you dumb ass?!" Sasuke snapped, wiping the snow from the side of his face; great, now he'd be wet.

"Gomen, Sasuke, but that was just too tempting to resist," Naruto replied, starting to laugh.

Clenching his jaw, Sasuke resisted the urge to yell at him, deciding to let it slide—this time. He wouldn't put it past Naruto try the same thing again later, if not sooner. He spoke between his teeth when he spoke again, forcing calm on himself.

"How'd you find me?"

"Someone said they'd seen someone who looked like you come this way, and then I saw the tracks," Naruto said sitting down on a snow-free patch next to him, irritating Sasuke in the sense that indicated that Naruto was not planning on leaving anytime soon. He probably wouldn't have minded so much if he hadn't been assaulted with a ball of crystallized water first.

"What do you want?" he asked gruffly, feeling annoyed.

"Nothing really," Naruto responded cheerfully, staring out over the cliff side, "What are you up to?"

"I was thinking, until you came," was the reply; Sasuke found that he was unable to keep the grouchy edge from his voice, "Where's Sakura?"

"Sakura-chan's borrowing a bird from the Raikage's aviary to send a message to Tsunade-obaachan. We should meet her in half an

hour," Naruto recounted lightly, seeming in a very good mood considering how early it was in the morning.

"Is the message coded?"

"How would I know? Probably," Naruto shrugged.

If Naruto didn't know what was written in the message, then that meant that Sakura hadn't shown it to him; that suggested to Sasuke that it was for Naruto's own safety. If asked about the context about the letter, then he could truthfully answer that he didn't know. What if the message was intercepted though? Would they then be in danger because of what it contained? If it was coded, then they might be okay if Sakura used a unique and uncommon code—

"Hey, Sasuke?"

His thoughts snapped back; not only was his mind wandering again, but now he was being paranoid. He wasn't usually this nervous about something, but this time he didn't know the terrain and wasn't sure exactly how to plan for the upcoming meeting with the Raikage.

"Aa?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"What?"

"What happened after we were separated?"

"We killed four Sound Jounin—they left us injured and out of chakra. We ended up backtracking to the teahouse to get help for ourselves, but it was closed. Sakura broke in and we ended up staying the night there," Sasuke felt the back of his neck grow warm against the chill of the air, his mind remembering the details that he hadn't said aloud, "We then traveled further the next day, stopping at a small town. We woke up early the next morning and met up with you."

"That's it? That's all that happened?" Naruto asked with raised eyebrows, sounding surprised.

"Yes," Sasuke answered irritably, "Were you expecting more?"

"I dunno... I guess I kinda was," Naruto said slowly, seemingly thinking about what he was saying—which was a bad sign.

Anytime that Naruto had to think about what he was saying strongly suggested that he was going to talk about a serious matter, which, in a way, was also a bad thing, because Naruto didn't normally talk about something serious.

"I mean, you were both gone for two days," Naruto continued, "and whenever someone mentions those two days, both you and Sakura-chan give each other weird looks. ...Well, Sakura-chan gives you a look—you just get this weird expression on your face. Like you turned to stone or something... Sasuke, did something happen between you and Sakura-chan?"

Sasuke turned his head sharply towards Naruto, deliberately showing a frown in the direction of his best friend. What exactly did Naruto mean by that?

"Gah! That came out wrong," Naruto exclaimed suddenly, facepalming, "I wasn't suggesting that anything like *that* happened between you and Sakura-chan...well, unless *that* did happen, so I guess you could take it that way...but if nothing happened... Well, I want to know what happened by not in the way that I made it sound like..."

"You need to learn when to stop talking, dobe," Sasuke grumbled, turning away and closing his eyes, extinguishing his senses. The back of his neck was burning, and he was glad for a high-collared shirt, which would hide that.

"Gomen, Sasuke," Naruto said sheepishly, regaining his composure, "I guess I'm just wondering. You two are different from when we were

genin and I guess that I guess that I get the feeling that sometimes when the three of us talk, that it feels like just you and Sakura-chan are talking... Like you both know things and share things with each other..."

"What are you talking about?"

"I don't feel left out...'cause it seems like something that you both aren't able to share with me," Naruto said pensively, his voice sounding far off, "I guess I'm just kinda thinking out loud."

"I noticed; it's impossible to follow thoughts when it's *your* thought pattern," Sasuke remarked; he didn't want to think too hard about what Naruto was saying. He didn't want to know what truths he would find there.

Naruto chuckled appreciatively at Sasuke's sarcastic remark, but did nothing to retaliate; Sasuke found himself growing slightly uncomfortable. Naruto's behaviour and the topic of conversation was starting to diverge to a certain air of finality, like there was one more thing he wanted to ask, and Sasuke was not sure he wanted to have to answer.

"I guess what I'm trying to say..." Naruto started after a minute, speaking slowly, "Well, what I'm asking... You don't...well, *love* Sakura-chan, do you?"

Even though Sasuke had been prepared for a question like this, it still threw him for a loop. What made it more difficult to answer was the fact that it was Naruto who was asking the question. It was Naruto—unperceptive slow Naruto—who was asking this.

"No," Sasuke replied, slowly and evenly. The answer came off his lips before he even stopped to think about it; of course he didn't love her. "I don't."

Not like that, at least. He couldn't even begin to be the best man for her even if he did care about her in that way—the dreams where she

had died only made that too clear for him. There were too many risks involved that would endanger both of them, and there were too many ways he could still hurt her. Both Naruto and Sakura were already in danger by being his friends...he didn't want anyone to be put into further danger by being closer to him than that.

"Don't give her hope then," Naruto said sharply, "Don't make her believe that you just might. Sakura-chan's been hurt badly enough by your leaving...don't go hurting her by shattering her false hopes."

Sasuke could almost hear Naruto adding: *"Those shards hurt the most."*

There was silence afterwards, and it was a long time before Naruto gave up that Sasuke would respond. Sighing, the fox-faced boy stamped his feet a couple of times in the snow to warm them before speaking again.

"I came looking for you because Sakura-chan doesn't want us to be late for the meeting with the Raikage," he said and Sasuke opened his eyes, the chakra flowing from him again, "We should go now, or she'll get mad."

Giving a short nod, Sasuke got to his feet and made his way back along the set of tracks left in the snow by the two of them. Naruto hung back for a minute, and Sasuke observed as he made another snowball behind the blind shinobi's back. Running to catch up, he threw the snowball as he drew near, putting a lot of force into his throw. Tilting his head to the side, Sasuke avoided the snowball as it whizzed by his right ear.

"Man! How the heck do you do that?" Naruto exclaimed in disappointment, falling into step with him, "I couldn't do that this morning when Masahiro threw one at me, and you're the one who's supposed to be blind! It's like you have the Byakuugan or something."

"I'll tell you when we get back to Konoha," Sasuke replied tonelessly, as they reached the gates back to the village, "when we're not in such a big mess."

"I dunno; I thought about it last night... The guy hasn't done anything yet... What can he do?" Naruto speculated.

Sasuke said nothing to him; Naruto had no idea how heavily the word 'yet' rang in his statement.

Sakura watched as the snow fell down from the sky above, the white crystalline dots landing on her face in thick fluffy clumps. Smiling at the flakes graced her face, enjoying the feeling of them melting slowly on her face. For a moment she could relax and forget the world around her—for now she could forget the tense knot of her stomach, tight from worry and agitation. All night had had difficulty falling asleep because she was worried about what could very easily happen.

She wasn't sure if Sasuke had realized, because he hadn't mentioned it, but one of the Raikage's door guards had been sitting at one of the booths in the restaurant last night. She hadn't thought much about it at the time, until Sasuke revealed that there was the possibility that the Raikage would resort to extremes and offer him to Orochimaru. He had been sitting at an angle where Sasuke's sense could not see him, and Sasuke probably hadn't gone out of his way to memorize the signature of someone they hadn't even been introduced to.

She had trouble sleeping and when she had fallen asleep she kept having dreams where Sasuke was thrown before Orochimaru, covered with the black marks of the curse seal. Those dreams always caused her to wake, and the one time she had woken, she had found Sasuke sitting on her floor. He too was having nightmares, and she wondered if he was just as nervous as she was about the situation as she was. Not wanting to burden him with her dreams in addition to his, she didn't say anything about her own. Instead the

two of them had watched the snow outside her window, which was comforting enough for her.

"Oi! Sakura-chan! I brought him!"

Sakura opened her eyes and turned her head away from the heavens, catching sight of a spot of orange coming through the white flurry of flakes. In contrast, Sasuke blended in with his surroundings, the navy Uchiha shirt causing him to look like Naruto's shadow.

"Oh, Naruto, before I forget..." Sakura said suddenly remembering something. When she had been writing her report to Tsunade, the day's date, October 10th, had been bothering her, and she remembered why now. She encompassed him in a big bear hug, "Happy birthday."

"What...? Oh, you're right!" Naruto's eyes were alight when he she released him, "It *is* my birthday!"

"Sorry that I didn't get you anything yet, but we'll definitely have to celebrate properly when we get back," she told him, smiling.

"Aw, Sakura-chan, you don't have to..." Naruto said laughing.

"Of course we do, don't we, Sasuke?"

"Uhh..."

"That's a yes," Sakura told Naruto firmly, "We'll do this right when we get home. In the meantime, we have a meeting with the Raikage."

At this she tuned and looked at Sasuke. Sakura was petty good at playing the game of politics, but she didn't have to do it professionally, and had never been under this much pressure before. If the Raikage did make a move towards Sasuke, she would be thrown into a deadly game against a much more skilled opponent, having to weave through a deadly dance of words and negotiation.

"Sasuke, you are sure you want to come? I mean if you leave ahead of us... I had intended on staying one more night here...but with this complication Tsunade would have never sent us on this mission if she had known you had tangled with Kumo before. And—"

"It'll be okay, Sakura," he replied, his voice even; how could he be so calm? He probably wasn't, but as he was blind, there was no way she could look into his eyes and tell.

"Alright, but...please Sasuke, let me try and negotiate in the event that something goes wrong. Don't try to escape...not unless it seems like there's nothing more I can do about it...then..."

"Run like hell," Naruto finished; Sakura felt her lip twitch in nervous smile before nodding in anxious agreement with Naruto.

"I trust you," he said solemnly, and if they had been alone, Sakura would have touched her forehead to his.

"I know you do," she replied. *'But I wish that I could trust so absolutely in myself,'* she added mentally.

"You ready, Sakura-chan?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," she replied, taking a deep breath, "Let's go."

The three of them were led to a sort of conference room next door to the Raikage's office as they arrived at the building. The room was plainly furnished, a coat stand by the door and a potted plant in the corner, there was nothing much in the way of decoration. The Raikage was already inside waiting for them when they entered, and just as they had yesterday, he smiled broadly.

"Ah, come in! Come in! Make yourselves comfortable," he wheezed cheerily at them, and Sakura speculated briefly on how much he spoke through his nose.

"Konnichiwa, Raikage-sama," Sakura greeted with a respectful bow, "Thank-you again for the strawberries yesterday, they tasted very good."

"I'm glad," the Raikage said happily, "Now tell me about your trip."

The Raikage was the very picture of excitement as he listened to Sakura recount their version of their journey. He made comments whenever he felt like it and gasped and applauded at all the right places, like she was telling him an adventure story instead of a serious account of their mission. Of course she did a bit of editing when it came to how involved Sasuke was with Oto, glossing over the extent of his confession to Tokugawa, tuning it down and making it sound like he had merely trod on their client's foot rather than have attacked Kumo. And then she also edited the whole bit of Sasuke and her couple of nights separated from the group. When she was finished, she handed over the spotlight to Naruto who told of the couple of days with the delegate.

Sakura relieved to hear that they hadn't run into any trouble after they had been separated. They had waited as long as she had instructed and was sure to keep an eye out for trouble. Apart from relatively lousy weather (which the Raikage offered his sympathies), they had no difficulties whatsoever.

When the both of them had finished, the Raikage, who had been hanging onto their every word like an excited child, leaned back and sighed contentedly.

"Ah, what a wonderful story, just like Manzo said, though I must confess...now don't take offense—" the Raikage lowered his voice slightly, "You aren't very good at story-telling. Now, my receptionist, she's wonderful at telling stories. On your way out, you should ask her for some tips."

"Um...I'll be sure to do that...sir..." Sakura remarked awkwardly.

"Now, there are a few things we need to talk about," the Raikage said evenly, his voice becoming guarded as his eyes turned to Sasuke, regarding the Uchiha carefully, "Manzo told me that you were a part of Otogakure...you, that one, whatever your name was."

"I have severed all ties with Otogakure, I have nothing to do with them now," Sasuke replied calmly.

It was amazing he could keep his voice so even, but she saw him tense. He was good at masking it, so she doubted whether the Raikage nor Naruto had noticed.

"Yes, yes, yes, but you *did* work with them, partake in missions, yes?"

"Yes."

"And you were part of the raid on Kumo that happened a year ago." It wasn't a question.

Sakura began to feel anxious; she didn't like the way things were going. It was more of an interrogation now than a meeting. Sasuke said nothing where he sat; the Raikage got up and walked over to the window and looked out.

"I thought as much," the Raikage uttered softly, and Sakura did *not* like the tone in his voice. The boyish mirth was gone, and instead there was a deadly serious edge, "Arrest him."

There were two poofs as the potted plant in the corner and coat rack by the door retook their true forms as Kumo shinobi. All of Team Seven leapt to their feet simultaneously, and the two shinobi seized Sasuke's arms before anyone could react.

"Raikage-sama! What is the meaning of this?!" Sakura demanded, slamming her fists down on the table.

"Uchiha Sasuke has committed crimes against this village and must be duly punished for it," the Raikage said evenly turning away from the window and walking towards them. He would not meet her eye.

"This is an act of war!" Sakura shouted at him. That time he did look at her.

"Konohagakure would go to war over a shinobi who betrayed them?" the Raikage asked incredulously, "You can't tell me that that isn't true, Haruno-san. His forehead protector is scratched and everything."

"Hey! I was the one who did that!" Naruto shouted in protest, "What is it with people from Cloud and making accusations before they know what's going on!"

"Well, I do know that this young man partook in events that greatly damaged Kumo, and he will not be leaving anytime soon!"

There was a tense moment in the room and Naruto stood seething at the Raikage; Sakura watched him anxiously—she could see Naruto's eyes were starting to go red, and while the pupils hadn't slit yet, they would be going next. It was Sasuke who broke the silence.

"I am not proud of what I did to this village, nor am I proud of anything I did while in Otogakure," Sasuke said coolly and evenly, "For what little it is worth, I give you my sincere apologies for my crimes, but if you do not wish to excuse my actions, I will leave quietly and bother you no further."

"You are right, Uchiha, when you say you apologies are worth very little," the Raikage replied icily, "However, you are worth much, much more."

A cynical smirk began to cross Sasuke's face, "You think that you can offer me to Orochimaru in order to stop the attacks that have been happening in the smaller branch villages of Kumo. You are too predictable, Raikage- *sama* ."

Sasuke spat the suffix with bitter contempt.

"I know that your ranking in Oto was high, but I was not certain that it was you until Manzo informed me of who you were," the Raikage muttered, more to himself than the rest of them, "But I am certain that Orochimaru would pay quite handsomely in exchange for you."

"Is that what you really think?" Sakura demanded, her inner self livid, "You think that Orochimaru will want Sasuke back? Well, I'm afraid you've been the victim of misinformation, Raikage-sama, because you're wrong. You must have noticed by now, Sasuke is blind; he can't see you or me—the world is dark to him. You think that Orochimaru wants him back? Well, Sasuke didn't leave Otogakure, he was thrown out. It was on the medical team that fixed him up when he was brought back to Konoha Hospital. He was lucky to be alive; he had been tortured that badly. As he is now, he is less than worth anything to Orochimaru. If you arrest Sasuke here, it *will* be an act of war, and not only will you be fighting Orochimaru, but Konoha shinobi as well."

The Raikage faltered slightly, glancing at the two ninja who were holding Sasuke captive there.

"We would be willing to help you fight against Oto, but only if you don't throw that chance away by arresting one of our own here," Sakura said quietly, talking as if to a frightened animal.

"Raikage-sama?" one of the Cloud shinobi asked uncertainly, "Orders?"

The man sighed heavily and waved loosely at the two men, "Release him."

Sakura inwardly sighed with relief as the two shinobi dropped their grasp on Sasuke. Things were good for now, but how long would it take before the Raikage would change his mind? If he was smart, he would let them go, but he was a desperate man in a bad situation, which meant he was unpredictable at best.

"You've made a wise choice, Raikage-sama," Sakura said carefully, "But due to the circumstances, I must insist that we cut our meeting short. We will have Tsunade-sama send word for assistance as soon as—"

"Just go," the Raikage said softly.

Sakura didn't need urging; indicating to the other two, they left.

"You would have been able to sense those two other shinobi in the room!"

"Yes, and?"

The three of them were walking back to the household of Tokugawa Manzo's nephew and Sakura was having an 'after-the-fact' freak out, arguing very one-sidedly with Sasuke. Sasuke seemed to realize what was happening to her, as he was simply answering her questions and wore an amused expression.

"Why didn't you tell me?!" Sakura continued, flustered.

"Because you said not to do anything because you would try and solve things diplomatically."

"Yes, but we could have left earlier or something if I had known!"

"That would have made things worse."

"Maybe," Sakura said skeptically, kicking a drift of snow, white sparkles showering everywhere.

"You did fine, Sakura-chan, you kept calm," Naruto said encouragingly as they walked up the front steps to the house, "I don't know how Sasuke stayed calm, he doesn't like being restrained."

"I'm amazed at how much trust you put in me," Sakura admitted, looking over to the blind shinobi, whose hands were shoved deep in

his pockets, "What would you have done if things had gone badly?"

"I would have done this," Sasuke replied coming to a halt. He stood still for a moment while Sakura and Naruto looked on curiously. Then there was a small pop as he disappeared in a puff of smoke. Sakura and Naruto jumped.

"Kage...bunshin...? Naruto said slowly, a baffled expression on his face.

The front door of the house opened and the two of them turned, only to see the real Sasuke standing in the front door with a young Masahiro clinging to his arm.

"You're back earlier than I expected," he said to the two of them, ignoring Masahiro as he let go of his arm and ran to Naruto, "I'm glad, I don't know how much more of that brat I could have taken."

"You bum!" Sakura exploded, diving for a snow bank and grabbing a handful of snow, "What was that about trusting my diplomatic relation skills?"

Sasuke dodged to the left as the snowball catapulted past him, grazing his ear—Sakura had thrown it with such a tremendous force that it had stuck to the side of the house. "I meant it—I trust you."

"With a copy of you and half your chakra! That's all!" Sakura retorted, diving for another snowball, which Sasuke dodged as well. She then rounded on Naruto, "And you, why aren't you defending me?!"

Naruto was standing there, the boy Masahiro clinging to his arm, grinning broadly, "I'm too busy thinking how nice it is for a change that I'm not on the receiving end this time."

He received a snowball in the face.

"I did not trust the Raikage, so when Naruto came by the house earlier to look for you before the meeting, I made a bunshin and sent

it in my place. But I agree with your suggestion, Sakura, we shouldn't stay any longer here than we have to. I've already packed our things."

Sakura grumbled and pushed past him in the doorway. She was still ticked off about the nerve of the bunshin trick, but he was right, they had to leave. And in less than five minutes she was hugging a crying Masahiro good bye and thanking his mother for their hospitality. She was too busy with the formal goodbyes that she didn't notice that Sasuke was preoccupied.

Sasuke tuned out the sounds of goodbyes around him and stood rooted to the spot as he tried to get a lock on something that had got his attention. There had been a very powerful chakra signature that had briefly come in on the edge of his senses. There was nothing particularly special about it save for the fact that there had only been one chakra signature that he had come across that was more powerful—and that was Naruto's.

A/N: Funny how it's Naruto's birthday in this chapter and I finished writing it on the day before his birthday. Life is funny that way. XD Anyways, this concludes the mission arc (almost). There's only one more major event that takes place in this arc, and that'll be in the next chapter or so. Oh, and the last segment of this chapter—the anomaly signature, don't dwell on it too much, because I won't be touching on it until the next arc.

Please review!

Chapter 36

A/N: Another chapter brought to you by ObsidianSickle and her cruel mind. My editor is constantly telling me that I'm so mean to Sasuke. I suppose I am in a way...but that's what happens when you make bad choices...they come back to bite you. But I guess what happens in the following chapter isn't a result of his mistakes... That's just me being mean... again :p

Before we begin, a couple of announcements to make:

-Koo2Koo1Ka2chool gets a cookie for being my two thousandth reviewer

-Message to "Angry Reader": I already updated a week early. I was on vacation. Deal with it. I'd like to see you try and make me. Ha.

-People dwelt too much on the anomaly signature, no it's not magical Kisame, sorry. Don't find out till next arc. :p

Chapter Thirty-Six: Slipping Between Fingers

The journey back to Konoha was proving to be a slow one after they had left. No longer in a hurry to meet any deadlines, Sakura had ordered the group take it slow, as they had missed a day of rest that she had originally planned in Kumogakure. But Sasuke knew the story a little differently from the upfront reasons she had given both he and Naruto. Sakura was trying to make the duration of the trip longer in order to knock off some of the hours Sasuke owed to the village. Additionally, the extra time allowed for healing sessions when they stopped for the night, and Sakura was not left nearly so drained.

Neither of them had spoken to Naruto about what they were trying to do. The prospect of Sasuke's eyes being able to see again was still

quite a small window, which wasn't even open all that wide. They both knew that Naruto would be overly optimistic about the idea if he found out, and if they failed, he would be as crushed as any of them. They didn't want to get anyone's hopes up, even if they had observed a small improvement. The few extra hours of rest were proving to be productive though, as there had been even further developments in the restoration of Sasuke's sight, even over the past few days.

It was the third day since they left Kumo, making it twelve days total since they left Konoha. The weather had improved immensely, and in the lower valleys of the Land of Lightning, the snows were gone. At the moment it was warm and sunny out as they traveled back down that path that they had trod on not too long ago. Sasuke found in himself small out-of-character bursts of excitement as he subtly opened and closed his eyes, observing the changes. He had deactivated his senses so that he could pay better attention to them; he was hanging onto Sakura's hand as they walked, trusting her guidance. The world was still black, but when he opened his eyes, there was a significant change in how black the world actually was. He was enjoying the fact that when he closed his eyes, the world was dark, and when he opened them it was slightly lighter.

"What are you doing, Sasuke?" Naruto asked, seeming to have noticed what the said Uchiha was doing, and finding his behaviour strange.

"The air is drying my eyes out," Sasuke replied in an irritable tone, as the back of his neck felt warmer.

On his right, Sakura giggled; Sasuke gave a lopsided smirk and squeezed her hand knowingly.

"You know, you're so cheerful nowadays—I see you so much happier than when you were first found," Sakura said pensively, with a touch of amusement, "But you still don't smile quite right. It's too bad, because you're so close too."

"Who, Sasuke? Cheerful?" Naruto said dubiously, then the next part was directed in Sasuke's direction, "Who are you and what have you done with my best friend?"

"Shut up, dobe," Sasuke retorted, but made no further jibe.

It was true that he was feeling more cheerful, he felt so carefree at the moment, it was nice feeling. Maybe just for one day he could suppress and lock away all the horrible thoughts that lurked in the corner of his mind. For once maybe he could rationalize the world and pretend for a moment that nothing mattered; it was just him and his two teammate, his two best friends. Of all the long-forgotten emotions he had trapped inside of him, the emotion of indifference was the one that had collected the most dust. He hadn't felt like this since before his family had been killed; there had always been something to worry about, to care about, to be determined to achieve. Right now, not having a care in the world, was the most wonderful feeling he had experienced.

Good things never last forever.

It was then that two chakra signatures had just arrived within his range of awareness, not that this particularly was bad—they had been passing people a lot over the past few days—but what made it worth attention was that one of the signatures was ridiculously powerful. This was not the signature of a merchant or traveler—only shinobi training and regular use of chakra could expand the amount of chakra one had. Whoever was coming their way was powerful—so powerful in fact, that he had only encountered two signatures that had surpassed this one. One was Naruto's—when that strange red chakra engulfed him—and the other he had sensed in Kumogakure. He stopped dead in his tracks, analyzing the signatures, unsure of how to access the situation.

"Sasuke?" Sakura had stopped because he had, her voice sounded confused.

A frown descended upon his brow; the two signatures were a ways away, but they were drawing nearer—which meant they were traveling the same road as them, except in the opposite direction. They would undoubtedly meet up with them eventually. Had the Raikage changed his mind? Were these two people after them? But there were no signatures coming from behind, they weren't surrounded.

"Sasuke, answer Sakura-chan's question, will you?" Naruto grumbled impatiently.

The world made itself known to him as he activated his senses, "There are two people coming down the road towards us, one of which whose chakra is extremely powerful."

Sakura's face was considerate for a minute, she looked like she was pondering the idea carefully, "Just two?"

He nodded once.

"Are they hurrying?"

"No, they're moving at a normal pace."

"They could possibly be some Cloud shinobi returning home," Sakura said with careful consideration, "We'll just pass them by and hope for the best. If they give us trouble, then it'll be war with Kumo for sure."

"That is if they are Kumo shinobi," Sasuke heard Naruto mutter, and despite Sakura being closer to Naruto than he was, he didn't think that she had heard.

He himself merely nodded, but said nothing more. He dropped Sakura's hand and shoved his own deep in his pockets. Behind him, he was aware of Sakura's face falling in disappointment, and he almost decided to grab her hand again. Almost. He remembered what Naruto had said to him a number of days ago. Don't give her

hope. He wondered if he had been blurring the line a bit by holding onto her hand earlier. He hoped not.

He had let go of her hand because he felt wary of the two who were coming their way. He hadn't really meant to drop her hand, but it had been an automatic response to avoid showing any sort of weakness around people he didn't know. The ambience hadn't changed really though. He was slightly wary, but still in a carefree mood. Once the people had passed, he would be able to relax again, and if Naruto didn't shoot him any warning glances, maybe he would offer Sakura his arm.

"So I dunno about you," Naruto said conversationally, "but even though the Raikage may be a sneaky underhanded twit, I still think he's crazy."

Sasuke smirked; twit was actually the perfect word to describe the Raikage.

"Well, he definitely seems to have two sides to him," Sakura commented, seeming pensive.

"Just like you, Sakura-chan!" Naruto laughed, and then was forced to dodge a swing at his head.

"I do not! Right, Sasuke?"

He didn't say anything; he knew very well that Naruto was talking about the entity that he had come to identify as Demoness Sakura, which thankfully, thus far, had not turned her fury upon him. However he had had the opportunity to see her unleashed upon other poor unfortunates, primarily Naruto, and Sakura's father.

"Right, Sasuke? ...Sasuke?" Sakura asked again, her voice faltering.

He smirked to himself, chuckling slightly under his breath. Sakura's expression changed from defensive to annoyed; raising her arm, she aimed to punch his shoulder in irritation. At the last moment before it

connected with his shoulder, Sasuke sidestepped it, and grabbed onto her fist, causing her to trip forwards. With a quick motion, he caught her to keep her from falling.

"You missed," he informed her in amusement, not letting go of her.

Her arms were trapped uselessly at her sides, and she struggled vainly. Naruto, taking advantage of her helpless state, jumped over to the two of them and gave Sakura a noogie. Once her hair was sufficiently untidy, Naruto stopped and Sasuke let her go.

She scowled at the both of them, fixing her rumpled hair, "Grrr...stop it with the grins, you two." When neither of them responded, she made a face and turned to Sasuke, and asked him grumpily: "What's the progress on our two visitors?"

"You're just mad because for once it's us ganging up on you, Sakura-chan," Naruto laughed, starting to walk onwards again.

"Hmph, maybe I am," she smirked, "Just answer the question anyways."

Sasuke hadn't really been paying too much attention to the signatures, accepting Sakura's guess of them being Kumo shinobi as a valid one. Now he turned his attention back to them; the path must bend, he noted, because they would be close enough to be seen by now. However, there was nobody on the horizon just yet.

"We'll see them soon," he told her, and she nodded seriously, but her expression was peeved.

He knew she wasn't really mad, so he just kept his smirk to himself, and ignored the look on her face. He was rather amused by it; actually, she looked...how could he put it? If 'cute' had been within Sasuke's vocabulary, he would have found it relatively easy to describe her. She looked cute when she was irritated. However, the word was not within Sasuke's mental vocabulary—if it ever had been, it had been very much forgotten—and the descriptive word

eluded him. However he soon forgot about trying and finding the perfect word, as his mind went numb with shock as the two people came into sight.

All of Team Seven had come to a standstill. Naruto and Sakura were too far away to see the faces of the people, but they recognized the garb immediately. Sasuke, however, could not see the colours, but that meant very little to him at the moment. No matter how far away the people were, his senses gave him the exact details like they were standing right in front of him, and he would recognize one face anywhere. He could never forget that face. It was impossible for him to forget.

It was Itachi.

He felt something come out from inside of him and envelop all other emotions he had been feeling, wiping them out. His hatred for his brother replaced every thought, every feeling, every *thing* that he had been feeling a few moments previous. His fists clenched at his side, and his face hardened; he automatically adorned his face with the most hateful glare he possessed.

"You!" he growled, the words leaving his mouth almost in a snarl.

The two members of Akatsuki stopped walking once they realized that the three down the path from them were all facing them. They were not far, within talking distance, but there was a wide enough distance between them to prevent any attacks from being launched unsuspectingly. Sasuke was doing everything in his power to keep his feet firmly planted where they were, opposed to attacking his brother right away. Attacking would be stupid at this point, and he knew he would lose instantly.

His brother studied him with what was mild interest by his standards, "Hm, you are not as dead as those in Oto would believe you are. I did not believe you would be. After all, you have a purpose to fulfill."

"What the hell are *you* doing here?!" Naruto demanded, with rage that was almost comparable with Sasuke's. The back of Sasuke's mind registered this question, though his conscious mind did not waver. If he had not been so angry and filled with loathing, Naruto's anger would have surprised him. He did not know why Naruto held his own hatred for Itachi, nor did he really care at the moment. What he did make note of at the moment though, was how he could sense the red chakra suddenly slipping out into Naruto. He was really pissed.

"I have no reason to explain our intentions to you, Naruto-kun," Itachi replied evenly, "We're not after you today, so move out of our way and let us pass."

Sasuke felt his anger begin to boil, his fists were clenched so hard that his nails almost were breaking the skin in his palms, "After everything you've done, you expect me to let you pass by here! Don't you ignore me and walk by like I'm not even here! I have sacrificed so much for this day! Today you will die!"

The other man called Kisame, he remembered vaguely, gestured at Sasuke's headband, "Look at that Itachi-san, your brother's gone off and run back to Konoha."

"So I see," Itachi acknowledged, blinking slowly and impassively, "That was indeed foolish, little brother."

"Don't you tell me what is foolish and what is not!" Sasuke exploded, at the same time that Sakura shouted: "That is not your place to say!"

Sasuke was surprised enough to let Sakura continue what he had started to say. The level of anger in her own voice was apparent as she spoke, her voice harsh and dripping with venom.

"You have no right to govern or judge his decisions," she said fiercely, "It would only be a foolish decision if he knew he would not be accepted back!"

"Maybe. But he will never be able to gain enough strength to kill me if he cannot make up his resolve over something as important as where his loyalties lie," Itachi replied, his face seeming like it was made of marble.

"My resolve to kill you has never wavered!" Sasuke spat, "Ever since that day, ever since you killed them all, I have only sought one goal, and all roads I have taken will lead to that goal: your death."

Sasuke tensed his body, but Sakura looked sharply at him, "Sasuke, don't."

"I have no intention of dying today," Itachi said passively, "And you are delaying us in our journey, so remove yourselves from our paths."

"You off to ruin someone else's life? Going to take them away and kill them too?!" Naruto snarled, the chakra a blazing inferno within him, "Just like Gaara, just like however many other people you've taken?!"

"Naruto, stop," Sakura ordered, but it seemed he was paying as much attention to her as Sasuke was.

"Today you *will* die, and it will be by my hand!" Sasuke said, throwing in the last bit with emphasis. He didn't care what quarrel Naruto had against his brother, but he was going to be the one to kill him, without help from either Naruto or Sakura. This was his battle, this would be his kill. It was his clan, his revenge, his purpose. He was an avenger—a title that could only be given to one person alone.

"As I have said, I will not die this day, and do not claim that I will, my brother," Itachi said icily, his face hardening ever so slightly in Sasuke's senses, "I am not blind: I can see clearly that *you* are."

Sasuke faltered.

"You can never hope to kill me," Itachi continued with a tone of finality, "No matter what you have sacrificed, not matter what you have given up, you have lost the one thing that gave you the slightest chance of achieving your goal. I will not fight against someone as weak and as handicapped as you—you were too pathetic to be killed back then. Now you have become even less that that; I once considered you almost worthy of fighting, but now you are too pathetic for even that. You are not capable of victory."

Anger was coursing through him; hot rage shook his very existence, he could feel his blood on fire. What had he gone through those past few months for? What had he sacrificed his eyesight for? What had he joined Orochimaru for? What had he hurt his friends and betrayed everyone for? For this. For this moment. For his brother. He had lost everything, sacrificed everything, thrown everything away so he could kill his brother. So he could fulfill his dream. He would not be told he could not do it. He could kill Itachi, he would prove it to him. Right now.

He shifted his footwork so that he was ready to spring at this slightest change in his brother's features. Itachi's face was unmoved, his expression passive; his gaze seemed even more empty and blank with Sasuke's senses—he could not see the Sharingan, only the blank white surface of his eyes. He allowed himself a sadistic smirk as he knew his advantage—he could not be caught in his brother's genjutsu, he would never be subject to the Mangekyou ever again.

"Sasuke," Sakura's voice came to him after a long period of silence from her. It sounded far away and quiet to his ears, where the blood was pounding loudly, but it was firm, "Stop this right now."

"Stay out of it, Sakura," he snapped at her, paying hardly any notice to her.

He was waiting for Itachi to do something—anything. One more comment, one movement, one smirk—one final thing—that would set him off. That's why he paid little attention when she extended her

hand towards him; he knew she was going to try and calm him by putting her hand on his shoulder, but that would not stop him. He prepared himself to shrug it away, but then something happened that Sasuke hadn't expected.

What happened, happened so quickly that it would have only been able to be caught with the Sharingan, so Sasuke had no idea what had happened until it was too late, until he realized with horror and outrage that he had been thrown into the deep depths of one of Sakura's genjutsu.

With cunning skill and practiced speed, Sakura flicked her wrist sharply as she reached for Sasuke's shoulder. The movement redirected the trajectory of her fingertips and they instead went to the back of Sasuke's head; with her mastery of chakra, she was able to send it to her fingertips at a speed that was just surpassed by the speed of sound. Sasuke wouldn't have been able to stop her even if he had tried, the movement had hit him in the back of his head too quickly—he wouldn't even have had time to *think* about reacting. It had been her second strongest genjutsu too—it would take him hours to get out. Uchiha Sasuke's body slumped to the ground, unconscious.

"What the—Sasuke!" Naruto shouted, alarmed, not yet realizing what was happening.

The instant that the loud-mouthed ninja had whirled to see what had happened to his best friend, Sakura saw with a jolt that already his eyes had turned red, the whisker marks had darkened, and his canine teeth had grown more prominent. She had been concerned that his anger would awaken that side of him, and she knew that she shouldn't have been so surprised to find that indeed it had already happened. Acting quickly, she tapped the back of his head as well, and before Naruto knew what was happening, he joined Sasuke on the ground, unconscious as well.

"Very powerful genjutsu," Itachi commented, observing what she had done—he sounded a little impressed as well.

"That was curious behavior," Kisame grinned, seeming amused.

"Shut it!" Sakura yelled angrily at the two of them, "Just leave my friends alone! Stay away from Naruto and stay away from Sasuke. You have no idea what you've done to them—especially Sasuke! Don't you dare go calling him pathetic, he's got worth in one of his hairs than you do in your entire body, so just stay away and stop making his life worse!"

Using her brute strength together with her chakra to increase her power, she picked up both of her unconscious teammates like they were two sacks of grain, slinging Naruto unceremoniously over her shoulder. She fumbled clumsily with her kunai pouch and withdrew a smoke bomb.

"Just stay away from us," she hissed before dropping the small item, and being enveloped in a cloud of smoke.

And it was because she was making her escape under the cover of smoke, that she never got to see Itachi's expression after her departure. She never saw the small smile on his face and the pleased 'hm'.

The sun was starting to dip into evening before Sakura stopped. After dropping the smoke bomb, she cut through the woods and came out around the bend of the path they had been following. She traveled a long ways down the path, almost three hours, putting as much distance between the three of them and Uchiha Itachi and that other guy. She did not wake Naruto or Sasuke from their illusion until she had stopped; she wouldn't put it past them to try and go back if the distance didn't seem all that far for them. But using chakra to transport two fully grown teenaged boys was taxing.

It was at an old picnicking spot that she stopped. It was off-season for regular people to be camping or picnicking, so the place was deserted. Setting Naruto and Sasuke down on a patch of grass in a break in the trees, she took a few-minute breather. She was reluctant to wake either of them right away; she wasn't mentally prepared yet—she knew they both would be angry with her and she figured Sasuke even more so than Naruto would be. Kneeling down between them, she took a deep breath and tapped their foreheads at the same time.

"Kai."

They both opened their eyes at the same time, but Sasuke was the only who to sit up instantly. He was scanning around with his senses so intently that he was growing careless—Sakura could feel it; it sent an involuntary shiver over her. Naruto, on the other hand, seemed to still be trying to figure out what happened.

"Where's Itachi?" Sasuke demanded harshly.

Solemnly, Sakura turned her head and looked straight into his blind eyes, "Miles away, Sasuke."

His face became with an expression of stony wrath, and expectedly leapt to his feet and stormed off, leaving her and Naruto alone. She wasn't worried; he wouldn't leave—she knew him well enough now.

Slowly Naruto sat up, and when he met her eyes, they were not full of anger, but full of hurtful despair. It hurt her deeply too receive the look he was giving her, even the saddened eyes of a broken-spirited animal came nowhere close to the wounded look she received.

"Don't—" Sakura started, interrupting Naruto as he began to open his mouth, "I know you wanted to fight back there—I understand why. I know that someone else is now going to die because of them. You managed to save Gaara, yes, but you can't possibly save all of them, Naruto. We could have fought them, I know, but can you look at me now and tell me that we would have won?"

Naruto closed his mouth and looked away, his face hard and eyes glassy with unshed tears.

"If we had fought them, we could have all ended up dead, and the poor person they're after would be taken anyways," Sakura said gravely, knowing that the truth was hurting the person she considered her second brother, "I made a strategic choice—a shinobi's choice. Keep us all alive and let Itachi go, or all end up dead and the Jinchuuriki too."

There was a pause from Naruto before he asked: "Where's Sasuke?"

"He went that way," Sakura pointed in the direction he had gone, the roof of a picnic shelter visible above some trees, "He isn't taking this well."

Naruto was uncharacteristically quiet, sitting on the ground, staring at his hands. She let it be that way for a few minutes before standing up wearily, feeling a heavy weight on her shoulders as she did so. The sun was just beginning to grace the horizon—it would soon be dark.

"Come, help me set up camp," she said in a gentle voice.

Wordlessly, Naruto got to his feet, and together with Sakura, they went to unpack.

Naruto was quiet during the entire time they set up camp, a grim aura hanging heavily around him. Sakura felt badly for him; he of course would understand better than anyone what it was like for a Jinchuuriki, and he knew that one was now condemned to death. It wasn't until the entire camp had been set, firewood gathered and the sun glowing orange as it sank halfway over the hills, that Naruto finally spoke.

"Is Sasuke going to be okay?" he asked grimly, placing a slight emphasis on Sasuke's name, knowing that *he* was going to be fine, but he wasn't so certain about his best friend.

"I..." Sakura started, and then paused, "He will be...but I don't know how long it'll take. I wish we had never run into Itachi... Today was the first day that I saw Sasuke act like a normal guy, a guy having fun with his teammates—he almost smiled today. And then out of all the people we had to run into on the road today, it had to be his brother."

Naruto nodded grimly, and gazed off at the picnic shelter. Wherever Sasuke had been, he had returned and was now sitting on the porch outside of the shelter, just within their view. They were both sitting now on the ground in front of the pile of wood that would be their fire when lit, casting the occasional glance at the lone Uchiha.

"What happened to him?" Naruto asked after a moment, "I mean, other than...well, you know..."

Sakura sighed heavily, "I think he's had a sort of relapse. He was getting so much better, becoming much more open and almost smiling. I was seriously beginning to believe that maybe he could let go of the past, maybe forget about his revenge, or at least leave it alone. I was hoping maybe he would think he didn't need it, and on the day where he possibly could have started to believe that... I'm sure he was reminded of everything that happened to him, and now I don't know if he'll go back to being the way he was when he first was brought back, or if he'll even dare open up again like he did."

"What are we going to do?" Naruto questioned miserably, tearing his gaze away from Sasuke and looking instead at Sakura.

"I don't know..." she whispered in reply, "I think...I think I'll go talk to him."

"Okay, what do you want me to do?" Naruto asked, casting a glance in Sasuke's direction.

Sakura got to her feet and sighed, "Well, he's probably mad at me, so it might not go well... Maybe it'd be better if you went and got us some water."

"Will you be okay?" Naruto got to his feet as well, stretching slightly.

"Yeah... I've lived with Sasuke for how long now? I think I'll be okay."

Nodding, Naruto turned and went over to their backpacks, pulling out the water canteens and slinging them over his shoulder, "Good luck Sakura-chan."

"Hey," she called out, stopping him before he got too far away, "Thanks for not staying too mad at me."

"Lie. You made the best choice," he shook his head slightly at her, and then added: "Even though it might not have been the right one."

Sasuke saw Sakura approaching with his senses, drawing near to where he sat on the ledge of the picnic shelter, but he did not acknowledge her as she came close. He simply sat with his legs crossed, his fingers laced beneath his nose, and a relatively blank expression on his face, marred only slightly with the signs of anger. Sakura wore also a relatively blank expression on her face as well, save hers was marred with the slightly showing expression of melancholy seriousness; she said nothing to him when she came over to where he was, but stood directly in front of him, her hands at her sides as she looked down upon where he sat. He was off the ground a few feet, so she wasn't towering over him—his head was about the same height as her shoulder—but he still didn't like the fact that she was there, looking down at him.

After a long pause where neither of them moved, finally, Sasuke was the one to break the silence.

"Why did you do that, Sakura?" he asked her, his voice quiet.

She let out a quiet sigh, "Because our primary goal right now is to return to Konoha and report the mission completion, not your revenge. And because that is our mission, I will not allow you to go off and kill your brother."

Her words angered him. Right now he didn't give a damn about their stupid mission; he didn't care that that was what they were supposed to be doing. It was not their primary goal right now—or at least it wasn't his. His brother's death came before all things, his brother's death was always first for him, it came before all other things, nothing would stand before it.

"It is none of your business what I do!" he snapped at her, dropping his hands and turning his head towards her.

Her voice grew cross, "It is very well my business what you do. I am the team leader, and that makes me the one who is responsible for you while on probation. I'm your rehabilitator, teammate, and friend. Don't tell me that it's none of my business. For all of those reasons it *is* my business whether you try and kill him or not."

"And now, because you made it your *business* , he is still alive—because of you!" he exclaimed angrily at her, his fists clenching at his side.

"And so are you!" she retorted, her expression not changing even though her voice was growing angry as well.

His fury flared in his stomach, "And what the hell are you implying by that? That you think that I can't kill him?"

"No, you can't!" she told him haughtily, putting her hands on her hips, her eyebrows coming down in the start of a frown.

"Oh, and why not?! Why don't you think that I can kill him?" he demanded back, turning his head away from her. He would not give her the satisfaction of making it seem like he considered her his equal by arguing to her face. He was so angry right now—he didn't

care that she had possibly saved his life by throwing him in a damned genjutsu, she had saved Itachi's as well that day.

"Because you're not ready! You're not skilled enough yet! You don't have the strength required kill him, not now. He's right about that, even if you want very much to deny that!"

He lost his temper. Without even thinking, his hand lashed out at her, seizing the front of her shirt at the base of her neck. He grasped the fabric tightly, and he could feel his hand going numb with the amount of strength that he was putting into it. A burning sensation was creeping around on the spot where his curse mark was, but it did not spread; he could feel the seal doing its work, even though it burned. How dare she tell him that he was not strong enough yet? Especially after his brother had already gone and told him so already.

There was silence after that, and even though his face was not turned towards her, he could see her with his senses. She was back to wearing the expression of melancholy seriousness, and she did not try to struggle free from his grasp. Her chakra died back down to calmness, and he noted that she didn't even look alarmed at what he had done. She was regarding him carefully, and he felt, under her gaze, like she pitied him. The seconds ticked by: one...two...three.....fifteen...twenty... And then slowly she did something that he hadn't expected in the least, she slowly put her arms around him and pulled him into an embrace.

His head lay on her shoulder, and his fist was trapped between them; he was so surprised by what she had done, and after a time, the death-grip he had on her clothing slackened, and fell away. And then slowly, without knowing why, he put his arms around her waist in return; his arms were shaking.

His anger was still there, though it was no longer directed at Sakura; it was anger born out of sheer frustration of not being allowed to kill his brother. Itachi had been right—it had not been his day to die, and the fact that he got away alive, proving him right, frustrated Sasuke all the more. Frustrated anger was only part of what he was feeling

though—the other half, he could not really identify. It felt like there were a million little hooks embedded in his heart, and each was pulling painfully in every direction.

"You might not be strong enough yet, but I never once believed that you were pathetic."

He tensed slightly at her words. He didn't know what to say, or do, in response to what she said, if anything. He wanted to cry. Uchiha Sasuke didn't cry, let alone *want* to. Yet he felt the huge weight of grief suddenly build in his stomach, and sit there heavily, despite that. The thing was he didn't even know why he wanted to cry. It was like someone had opened the cell where he locked his emotions and they were slowly escaping. He began to panic slightly, doing everything in his power to get his emotions back under control again.

It was a long few minutes before he managed to regain his inward composure, and when he did, he realized how tightly he had grasped Sakura in his state of panic. Yet she had not complained once about this grip, nor had she done anything to loosen it, just waited patiently until he let go of his own accord. And he did—he slowly let go of her, embarrassed by his moment of weakness, but she said nothing about that either. She never judged him.

Instead she came and sat down next to him on the porch, staring out into the western sky, which was black to his senses. Without being asked, she began to describe it to him, telling him of the oranges and yellows that painted the sky. When she was finished, she turned to him, her expression serious. All these months he had trusted her, all this time she had helped him and guided him, he had trusted her and she had not failed him. He must not hurt her now—he wouldn't hurt her now. If he pushed Sakura away, then there was nobody left, he would never kill Itachi. He got it now; she had made her point.

"I'm sorry," he muttered so quietly, that it was barely audible to his own ears. Shamefully, he turned his head away from her, and extinguished his senses; he couldn't bring himself to look at her right now, not after almost hurting her right then.

Sakura gazed upon Sasuke with sympathetic eyes, but she still knew she had made the right choice. She knew Sasuke had been very close to attacking her, yet somehow she had not been afraid for herself. What had really frightened her was when she saw the curse mark on his neck turn red, and begin to swirl within the black barbed seal. The tomoe were pressing against the walls of mark, searching for a weak point to escape, but there were none.

After a while, she spoke, "Don't be sorry. You were angry, and it was my fault. But I knew what I was doing when I took both you and Naruto away. Itachi fights unfairly, and he would have taken advantage of your blind state. His genjutsu are powerful, and even though he might not have directed his attack to the back of your head, I'm sure one of his genjutsu would have severely thrown your other senses off for a bit."

He faltered for a moment, and finally he turned his head towards her again, a frown on his face, "How would you know? You've never even met my brother before today."

She shook her head at him, "I have. And I was able to watch him fight, as he fought against Naruto and Kakashi-sensei."

Sasuke tensed quite visibly, looking as shocked and surprised as Uchiha Sasuke ever could appear to be, "When was this?"

"It's complicated, so I'll just start from the beginning," Sakura said contemplatively, staring at the hills, which now had an orange glow above them, now that sun had disappeared entirely, "It all started about a year ago."

"Six months before you were found and brought back, Naruto and I saw each other for the first time in two and a half years. We had each gone our respective ways deciding to train and hone our skills, and we each had our own teacher to instruct us. Naruto was taken on by Jiraiya-sama, while I went to Tsunade-sama to train my medical skills. The ultimate achievement was to bring you back

home, when we were strong enough to do so. As it was, at the time, what attempts we made already were simply not good enough, and it disheartened us greatly," Sakura started, her eyes loosing their focus as she was caught up in her memories of the past; it was only a year ago, but sometimes it seemed like yesterday, "I never really did find out what Naruto actually did, but I myself built my skills up in everything. I was seriously lacking in taijutsu skills, as you may remember—" Sakura smiled to herself at this part, "—so Tsunade-shishou rather forced me into becoming better."

"She was a tough instructor, and if I couldn't avoid the projectiles, block the punch, or move fast enough, I paid for it. Also, we discovered that because of my ability to control my chakra so well, I was very good at genjutsu. It was one of my stronger points, so I spent time with both Tsunade-shishou and Kurenai-sensei practicing and eventually developing my own types of genjutsu. I became able to manipulate them how I wanted—whether I would actively control the illusion, or whether it would use the victim's own mind to spin a web of misapprehension. Sometimes if I could even hear the thoughts of those who were trapped in the genjutsu, but that drains a lot of chakra, and I don't like doing that," Sakura said placidly, and she glanced at Sasuke, but his face was masked of emotion, "Enemy or not, I believe one's thoughts should be private. Anyways, that was my genjutsu training. And then there was the medical training. Countless hours of reading textbooks, practicing on injured animal and birds, working up to more complicated animals, and finally people."

"The first time that someone died, when I was trying to save them, was very hard on me," Sakura remembered in her mind's eye a shinobi that had been brought in for emergency after a mission had turned horribly bad. There had been more blood than she thought possible to come out of a person. The features of the face hadn't faded with time, because they were already so disfigured from injury that she couldn't forget them. She remembered doing everything she could, and even though Tsunade had been by her side, assisting her through the procedure, the life had slowly faded. She remembered

the cold shock that she had felt quite clearly, "I felt like everything that I had been learning up to that point hadn't been good enough. I had tried so hard, but it amounted to nothing, I was wondering if I would ever be able to be of use. If Orochimaru had possessed you when Naruto and I eventually found you, would I be able to remove his soul from you? That was my ultimate fear, and my ultimate goal. I did not want that to happen to you, but if I could find, or create a technique, that would remove him from you, then I would have considered myself good enough."

"I became a Chuunin and passed the Exam with flying colours, I had done very well, and Kakashi-sensei told me he was proud of me. I was beginning to gain more confidence in myself, and my family was proud of my accomplishments. But even so, I missed both you and Naruto, and sometimes I grew lonely. When my brother was home, I spent time with him, but a lot of the time I spent with Team Gai, Team Ten, and sometimes Team Eight," she recalled all the times that she had spent with the individuals of each team. Friendly competition between her and Ino as they refined their medical techniques, discovering the joy of watching clouds and even daring to try snack foods again, despite calorie content. Or getting to know Hinata better, seeing beyond her shyness and learning more of her deep feelings for Naruto, laughing with Kiba as she discovered his great sense of humor, and growing slightly more accustomed to Shino and the bugs living in his body and clothing. And Team Gai—befriending Ten Ten and even the distant Hyuuga Neji, who she hadn't really known before, and Lee, who had always been a good friend to her, became even more so in those two and a half years. Then there was those at the hospital too, people from work whom she had gotten to know through her experiences, "My training wasn't entirely finished, but I gained a certain amount of independence and got a job at the hospital. I was one of Tsunade-shishou's few pupils, and I was her best. The staff at the hospital respected me greatly and often asked me for advice. To a lot of them, I was just as good as Tsunade-sama, though I still don't think I even deserve to be considered second best."

"Then Naruto came home," Sakura said with fondness as she remembered the day clearly, "We hadn't seen each other in so long, but when we looked at one another, we knew that we hadn't really changed—we had just become more mature, and more determined. It was like he hadn't been away at all, and we were talking and joking like we had been before. He was very disgruntled to find out not only that he was the only genin left over from all the rookies, that Neji had even become jounin, and his friend, Sabaku no Gaara, had become Kazekage of the Sand Village."

Out of the corner of her eye, Sakura saw Sasuke smirk to himself, obviously amused by Naruto's behaviour, which was just like the loud-mouthed ninja. Sakura grinned to herself and gave him a light reprimand, "Don't look so smug. *Now* who's the only genin left over?"

Sasuke let out an incoherent grumble that sounded like: 'yeah, yeah,' which caused Sakura to laugh.

"Anyways," Sakura continued, still smiling to herself, "What was left of Team Seven was brought together, and Naruto and I were to go up against Kakashi in a final test. Remember when we were supposed to get the bells from him, when we first became genin—?" Sasuke nodded "—Well, Naruto and I had to do that again, and this time, Kakashi didn't go easy on us—he used his Sharingan. But we passed—even though we did play a little bit dirty."

"How did you do it?" Sasuke asked, sounding genuinely curious, though Sakura doubted he had purposely let his confusion show; the question though was understandable. How could you cheat at getting two tiny bells?

"Well, Jiraiya-sama had written a new one of those books that Kakashi-sensei always reads, and he hadn't read the newest one. So, Naruto pretended to know how it ended, and started to tell him—and with the Sharingan, Kakashi-sensei could read his lips. He was so worked up about not being told any spoilers, that he closed his eyes and cover his ears," Sakura found herself smiling at the memory, the sheepish look on Kakashi's face had been worth it,

"After we got the bells, Tsunade arranged for us to become equals on a new team: Team Kakashi. No sooner had the team been formed, but word arrived from the Village Hidden in the Sand that Akatsuki had captured their Kazekage, and our first mission was a rescue mission."

Sakura paused in her tale, turning towards him, "Sasuke, have you ever heard about the Bijuu?"

He looked puzzled for a moment, and after a while he said: "It sounds vaguely familiar."

Another memory suppressed by Orochimaru, Sakura guessed, so she explained: "It's top secret in Konoha, but I'm sure that Naruto would have wanted you to know, so... In this world, there are nine demon creatures, each with a certain number of tails; these are known as the Bijuu. I don't know all of them, but I do know of at least two, and you've heard of the same two as well. These demons possess an incredible amount of strength, dexterity, and most importantly, chakra; that is why if they are sealed into people they possess abilities far beyond that of a normal person."

"Though I don't know the entire reason—I'm not sure anyone does—Akatsuki is collecting these animals for their own purposes, and by the sounds of things, they've got a few already. Ichibi no Shukaku was sealed within Sabaku no Gaara, and he was captured by Akatsuki and taken to their hideout. It all became one mess after that. Naruto, Kakashi, one of the Sand Village's elders—Chiyo-baasama, and I, ran into your brother. It took Kakashi and a number of Naruto's bunshins to beat him, and after that, we discovered that the person we fought was an animated corpse, given Itachi's appearances, chakra and abilities," Sakura gave Sasuke a serious look as she said this last little bit. When they ran into Itachi that day, she remembered the fight that Kakashi and Naruto had endured and the cold nervousness in her stomach returned. She did not want to have to engage Itachi in combat, because she knew that there was hardly any way they could have won, "That's how I know how he fought,

because he caught Naruto in a genjutsu, which left him badly shaken afterwards. I didn't want something like that to happen to you."

Sasuke was silent for a while afterwards, thinking deeply. She wondered what he was thinking, but dared not ask. She had done enough today already without delving into his thoughts. She did not want to give him reason to be angry with her further. She looked away to the horizon again, not expecting him to say anything in return, probably too proud or too angry with her to want to say anything, but surprisingly, he did.

"What happened after that?" the words were quiet, almost reluctant, but she was willing enough to give the answer.

"Well, to condense the tale, Team Gai came for backup, Naruto and Kakashi ended up fighting Gaara's captor, while I and Chiyo-baasama fought his partner, and killed him. That was one of the toughest and most painful fights I have ever endured, and one of the first where I could have almost died. Eventually, we rescued Gaara, but he was already dead; Chiyo-baasama sacrificed her life to bring him back, and he's still the Kazekage to this day. We returned home and continued on with our lives."

"But the reason that Naruto was so adamant about rescuing Gaara, and the reason he was so angry at your brother today is because... The strongest of the Bijuu—the nine-tailed fox that attacked Konoha seventeen years ago—was sealed in Naruto. I never knew why the adults hated Naruto, but I just knew that he was bad news and stayed away. I never realized the burden he carried. That is why he was so close to Gaara—he knew what it was like for him, growing up."

Her voice grew ashamed when she spoke next, and guilt was set in her heart, "I should have been a lot nicer to him. I wish I hadn't been so mean."

"Kyuubi..." Sasuke muttered to himself, and she didn't know what emotions he was feeling, "That explains a lot."

She glanced at him curiously, "Like what?"

"Like how Naruto always seemed to be better than me at moments when it really mattered, like when we were in the Forest of Death, when we were fighting Sabaku no Gaara—or that Ichibi demon, I guess, and when he fought me in the Valley of the End..." Sasuke's voice faltered slightly as he listed the last one, but quickly recovered, moving on. Whatever had happened at the Valley of the End, Sakura realized that he did not want to share it, "On this mission, when you were hurt. And it explains when I last saw Itachi, why he had more interest in Naruto than me. He had that thing in him the entire time, and it was helping him..."

' It must have really bothered him when his brother ignored him and wanted Naruto instead—Naruto, who he thought, at the time, was nothing more than the near-dropout of our class,' Sakura thought to herself, staring penetratingly at Sasuke.

"And after the Kazekage was retrieved?"

Saddened slightly that he wouldn't open up to her about how he had felt, but she answered his question anyways, "There was talk for a time of having your position on Team Seven replaced, but something was decided in by the higher ups, and it never happened. In the meantime, we were kept apprised of what little information we got about you, and practiced our techniques together as a team, ready to go after you at the drop of a hat. Six months passed without enough information, so Kakashi-sensei became busy with jounin missions, and I resumed work at the hospital. All the while, we were all waiting. And then one day, who did Kakashi-sensei bring home? You. To me, nothing else mattered after that. The rest you know."

"Thank you...for telling me," Sasuke replied quietly, seeming lost in thought, "Tell me something, though."

"What?"

"When you cast that genjutsu on me today, how did you do that?" he sounded frustrated, most likely because he was perplexed over how she had managed it, that Sakura couldn't help but grin.

"In the six months between Naruto's return and yours, I took up some training with Hyuuga Hinata, who disclosed as much as she dared about the Hyuuga fighting styles. Tsunade-sama recommended that I learn some for this one technique. It makes invisible extensions from my hands that act like scalpels, and can be used to cut tissue without opening up a patient. I don't like doing that technique because it doesn't feel concrete, but I enjoyed training with Hinata, and as a result, Naruto got to know her better as well."

"I see," Sasuke muttered, "So that's how he knew the Hyuuga girl."

"You don't think that Naruto's smart enough on his own to ask Hinata out without having being exposed to six months of obvious affection, do you?" she asked Sasuke grinning.

And much to her relief, she saw him smirk in amusement, "Of course not."

A/N: Finally done this chapter! Some of you may have noticed that I switched between Sakura calling Tsunade 'shishou' and 'sama'. When Sakura is talking about Tsunade in the context of being her teacher, she uses shishou, but all other times 'sama'. Sakura calls her 'sama' now because after Sakura was on Team Kakashi, she looked at her more as the Hokage than her teacher.

The last part was hugely dialogue, sorry :/ That's all. And the mission arc is officially over! New arc starting next chapter. Now we've had our action, and a share of fluff, now we move onto angst and fluff! My favourite XD

Oh, and I know upon defeating Sasori that Sakura and Chiyo received a reward of information, but for Blind, he died before he

could even choke out anything else, so they never found out about the spy at the Heaven and Earth Bridge. Basically what happened:

Sasori: ...I... have a reward for you...for...defeating me...

Sakura and Chiyo: (insert suspenseful anticipation and sounds of heartbeat here)

Sasori: (dies)

Sakura and Chiyo: Nooooooooo D:

Please review.

Chapter 37

A/N: Welcome, welcome! This new arc brought to you by: ObsidianSickle's creative naming skills! Introducing the Chuunin Exam Arc! Made from blood, sweat, and time. Warning: contains fluff and angst. Side effects include euphoria, depression, crying, laughing, frustration, sympathy, and in extreme cases, hysteria.

Lol, I just felt like I had to do an advertising thing. XD Yeah, the side effects are kinda exaggerated, though I know my cliff-hangers have frustrated some, while other scenes have made readers cry. :p So let us begin this new arc prepared and well warned, shall we?

Chapter Thirty-Seven: The Last Peaceful Slumber

Nariko was sitting down next to Flower-chan in the mess hall, kicking her legs forwards and back as she sat at the table, eating her food quietly. She was feeling restless at the moment and found it hard to sit still, even though she had been told many times that she should keep still. It was impossible though, Nariko thought, she had hadn't been able to see the outside world in days, and it was making her nervous. She was reminded too much of the hole that she had spent most of her life inside. But Flower-chan had been insistent. One morning she had shut the window and would not let Nariko open it for any reason, saying that now it was too cold to have the window open.

"When is Itachi-sama coming back?" she asked, stuffing some white stuff, called rice, into her mouth.

"Don't talk with your mouth full," Flower-chan reprimanded her, "And I told you three times already today, Kit. You have such a single-track mind."

Nariko swallowed her mouthful, unsure of what a single-tracked mind was, and stirred her food around in its bowl, "I know, I know. But eight days seems so long!"

"Don't play with your food," Flower-chan scolded again, frowning, "Sometimes I wonder why I even bother to try and teach you table manners."

"Why?" Nariko turned her eyes towards the azure-haired woman, curiously. There were a number of times over the past few weeks that she was talking like she wouldn't be around later to learn, and wonder if it was a waste of time to teach. Nariko was beginning to wonder if she really wouldn't be around.

"Because they're so bad that I'm beginning to wonder if you're beyond hope," Flower-chan responded, "But eight days is not that long in comparison to how long you've waited. Be patient."

Nariko nodded mutely and took another clump of rice, which she deposited into her mouth. Chewing slowly she paid little attention to the door of the commissary opening, until she realized that Flower-chan had gone very still. Looking over to see who it was, Nariko managed to stifle her squeak and not fall off her chair—but it had been a very near thing.

It was the leader of Akatsuki, and he stood in the doorway with a dominating air that caused Nariko to shrink away and hide behind Flower-chan as much as she could. He turned his strange-eyed gaze to the blue-haired woman, who had not yet turned to face him.

"Konan," he said, and Nariko puzzled for a moment before realizing that he was talking to Flower-chan.

"What's wrong?" Flower-chan asked, turning around, her voice becoming flat.

Nariko had only seen Flower-chan with the leader a couple times, but every time he was near her, she promptly became like Itachi—

blank voice and face. Afterwards, she would stay like that and it would take a little while before she would become the happy and kind Flower-chan that Nariko knew. Whatever the Leader had done to make her become like that around her, Nariko didn't know, and was afraid to know.

"There's been an infiltration," replied the leader equally as flat, "A team of Konoha shinobi have come to rescue our sensei."

"How is that possible? He was locked in one of our deepest cells," Flower-chan replied, sounding slightly surprised.

The leader shook his head in response, like he too was unaware of how it had happened. Whatever was happening was beyond Nariko though, and she had no idea what was happening. The word 'infiltration' was not one of the ones she was familiar with, but it must be bad, as there were people in the halls running to fix whatever wrong had happened.

"Konan," the leader said again—Nariko wondered if that was the name of the ever so nameless Flower-chan, "I want you to find them."

Flower-chan gave a curt nod and then, much to Nariko's alarm, she fell apart. Or that would have been the best way for Nariko to describe what happened, because she didn't have any other way to put it. What happened was that Flower-chan had suddenly started to flake, layer upon layer of pieces of paper falling away until there was nothing left *but* paper. And then, just as she had seen before, the paper started to move and fold itself. This time they formed into little insects, that Nariko had seen in the summer months—wasps they were called, and they had a terrible sting. All the paper wasps then took flight and stormed from the room with an angry buzzing only made louder by the flapping of paper wings.

The leader followed the swarm, and closed the door behind him, leaving a very stunned Nariko behind in the mess hall. She finished her meal alone, which she supposed was fine with her—it wasn't like

she hadn't had to do so in the past, but this was the first time that she had to eat in absolute bewilderment. When she was finished, she left her dishes out and left to go find out what was going on, only to find that the entire place was empty of all people. Wandering the hallways alone was eerie, and she began to grow nervous, being on her own. She didn't like being left alone for long periods of time, because she felt like she had abandoned, and then if she was left alone even longer, she began to remember the room that she had lived most of her life in. She did not like to remember that place.

Her footsteps echoed with each step and she grew more and more nervous with each one. She should go outside, she suddenly thought, if they weren't here, then they must be outside. It made perfect sense to her, and she quickly made her way through the tunnels of the mountain. She hadn't been outside since she arrived here, but she was quick to find the exit. There was no one by the doors either, and they had been left slightly ajar. Hurrying forwards, she ran over to the doors and pushed them open, feeling a very cold blast of air as she did so, causing her to flinch away, but not for long. She wrapped her Akatsuki cloak around her more firmly, and stepped outside. Her jaw dropped.

Thick white cold stuff covered the ground, the trees, and the rocks; the lake in the distance was hard and flat. She could hardly believe her eyes, and as if under an enchantment, she took a wandering step outside. The white stuff crunched under her feet and she jumped back almost instantly. It was so cold that it stung her bare foot. She wished she had brought her shoes, but she didn't like wearing them indoors. She was tempted to run and get them, but she was only going to be out for a few minutes. She would find everyone first and then she'd go back.

There were lots of rough bits in the white powder, in contrast to the smooth parts everywhere else. The others must have run through the white stuff, while dealing with the 'infiltration'. She took another step into the cold; if she moved fast enough, she could barely feel how cold it was. Taking a few more leaping steps forward, she

stopped and stood in the white stuff, which was midway up her lower legs. She started to shake, though she wasn't scared—but she was so very cold! Not only was she shaking, but also white stuff came out of her mouth when she breathed! It alarmed her at first, but soon Nariko was having fun exhaling at different speeds, watching the silvery mist spew out.

But she must look for the others too, she reminded herself. Prancing forwards in the white stuff, she followed the messy marks. They led off towards the forest and as she followed them across the plain, they broke apart and went in different directions. Stopping still, she cocked her head to the side; which path should she follow? Looking around her, she spotted the lake in the distance. People would go there, most likely, she decided, where else would they want to go?

She started down the plain towards the lake, her feet kicking the white stuff up in the air, and it fell back down in sparkles. She didn't notice that her feet couldn't feel the cold anymore, or anything else for that matter, nor did she notice that her toes were starting to turn blue. She was having so much fun that she paid little attention to how she was feeling. She had never seen anything like this before!

It was then that she lost her footing and was sent tumbling down to the ground, where she began to roll a few feet. When she came to a stop, she was covered in the white stuff, and looking up at the sky. Nariko started to laugh, it had been fun rolling down in the cold stuff like this, she hadn't had so much fun in a long time. She blinked up at the sky, a smile on her face, and then blinked again in confusion. There were white dots floating down—hundreds and hundreds of them. One landed on her eyebrow and she blinked again in astonishment as it turned to water. It was the white stuff—it was falling from the sky like rain. Except cold—and it was falling slowly down, instead of fast. White rain...it was so pretty. She would tell Itachi about the white rain when he got back.

She lay in the white stuff for a long time, watching more of it falling from the sky. It held her eyes captivated, and she could not look away. There was so much of it, and it never seemed to stop coming.

She did not notice that she could no longer feel her fingers, or that the sky was getting darker as the sun set. She didn't feel all that cold, actually, the longer she lay there, the warmer she began to feel. There was a warmth in her stomach that was growing, keeping her from feeling cold. And she was getting sleepy too. Maybe she should take a nap for a bit, and let the white stuff cover her.

The white dots where getting thicker... and bigger too. Really big... That one there was huge, she noted with dim awe. It looked the size of a butterfly... It moved like one too, she thought vaguely. The huge dot got bigger as it circled down. It was a butterfly, Nariko smiled at the thought, it was one of Flower-chan's butterflies... And then it flew away. Nariko made a slightly pouting face, but then closed her eyes. She was so very tired.

"Kit!"

Someone was calling her... Kit... Flower-chan called her that... She was being called by Flower-chan...

There was a crunching of snow and voices as people moved towards Nariko. She just wanted them to go away, she was so tired, and she felt hot. She wanted the people to stop shouting and just let her sleep...

Konan knelt down beside Nariko in the snow, worry marring her face as she examined the girl. Deidara, Hidan and Kakuzu stood off to the side, having convened towards the area as she had indicated to their respective search parties that the girl had been found. Now they stood in waiting, some of them almost anxious to hear the woman's assessment of the girl's state. They could all feel the Rokubi's chakra swirling actively in the girl.

"She's hypothermic," Konan told them, and she patted Nariko's face, "Kit...Kit... Stay awake, Kit. We need to get you inside."

"The white rain...is so pretty," she mumbled sleepily in reply, "It's so very...nice..."

"Yes, Kit, it is," Konan replied hurriedly, "Don't fall asleep now. I know you're tired, but try to stay awake."

"I'm...too...hot..." she muttered.

"She's delirious. We need to get her inside, *now*," Konan snapped at the three members standing nearby, "Rembrandt, get your ass over here right now. Carry her on your back."

Deidara bounded over like he had been burned; everyone knew better than to cross their Flower-chan during a crisis or otherwise. Picking up the frail girl, Konan draped her over Deidara's back and after making sure he wouldn't drop her, she snapped at him.

"Move!"

He moved, trotting as quickly through the snow as he could possibly move, with Konan behind him, Kakuzu and Hidan bringing up the rear.

"Move faster, Dei!"

"I'm going as fast as I can, un!" Deidara complained, kicking great drifts of snow aside as he charged back up to the entrance.

"Can't you *feel* the chakra spiking out of control?" Konan demanded, her temper flashing, "If we don't get her treated soon, we'll lose the Bijuu with her. It'll most likely try and keep her alive in order to save itself, but if she grows too weak, then it might take advantage of that and break loose! And then I know that *I'm* not going to be the one who explains to Pein why our hideout is destroy and why we're short a Bijuu, because you can't run fast enough!"

Deidara muttered something that sounded like: 'we'll all be dead anyway, so it doesn't matter', but sped up regardless. The four of

them charged through the doors, the guards letting them through without question as they flashed their rings. Nariko must have passed out, because she no longer was semi-responsive. As they charged through the hallways, Konan dismissed Kakuzu (Moneybags) and Hidan (Dirt Mouth), telling them that she no longer need them. They had found Nariko, and if she regained consciousness with those two around, she would be frightened out of her skin. And there was no telling what would happen then.

Deidara kicked the door open to the wing that was their infirmary and dumped Nariko down in an empty bed. Other lesser subordinates of Akatsuki barely glanced over as the two entered, they were treating their own wounded—the infiltration team had done a good number on Akatsuki, but not without suffering losses of their own.

"I wonder why she went outside, yeah," Deidara puzzled, watching as Konan checked Nariko's forehead once more.

"I don't know. I'll find that out later," the azure-haired woman replied, not liking the symptoms.

"What do you want me to do?" Deidara asked, sounding like he was willing to accept the fact that he may be forced into assisting with whatever she would do.

"Leave!" Konan hissed back, shooting him a glare, "You're wasting space! Get out of here."

Deidara scuttled out of the room before she could further reprimand him, just as another medic approached Konan. Inwardly sighing, she wondered what the man wanted, feeling like she was being constantly interrupted.

"O Messenger of God, what of the new hostage?"

Konan turned and looked over at a hospital bed that the man indicated to. In it lay an older man—late forties—who had white-blond hair, matted with blood. There was a nasty looking gash in his

shoulder, and a few cuts and bruises on his arms. She narrowed her eyes—she had seen him while scouting out the infiltration team. She remembered his piercing royal blue eyes.

"Stabilize him and then throw him in a holding cell," she said seriously, slipping into the roll that she had taken upon deciding to follow Pein's dreams, "Pein-sama will determine what to do with him later."

"Hai! Pein-sama's word is law," the medic replied seriously, before scuffling away.

Konan sighed inwardly and pushed away the inner twang of unease that she felt when she heard him spoken of with such high respect. She couldn't be distracted now; she had to focus on Nariko. Damn Itachi, she thought with empty resentment, he just *had* to leave *her* with his Jinchuuriki. This girl was such a handful. Letting out another sigh, she began to tend to the hypothermic girl, praying to whatever gods there were, that she could get Nariko's symptoms under control before the six-tailed weasel decided otherwise.

It was late at night when Team Seven returned home—close to midnight. They had traveled faster the past couple of days because Sakura felt that they had taken long enough already in their travels and were running low on supplies. They had had enough food to last them the last bit of the way if they rationed it and picked up the pace. If they bought any more supplies, they would have had too much then, and it would have been a waste of money.

As it was, they had barely stumbled through the front gates when the guards at the door leapt up upon spotting them. Confused and bewildered by their sudden movements, Sasuke automatically put a hand to his kunai pouch, but the two men did not attack. Instead they rushed straight over to where an exhausted Sakura stood, looking absolutely relieved at seeing her.

"Sakura-san! It's a blessing that you've come back this evening. They need you at the hospital right away!" the one said hurriedly.

Sasuke had barely any time to register what the man had said before Sakura ran off down the road in the direction of the hospital. Sakura had been so exhausted a moment before, that he was having a little trouble realizing that he was watching her receding back. Naruto glanced at him and Sasuke shrugged, he was uncertain if he was meant to follow, but he decided to anyways, not really caring what Naruto did; Naruto chose to follow as well, and the two of them caught up to Sakura and the one gate guard. He had followed her to give her information on what was happening on the hospital, and Sasuke only caught the end of the package.

"...been four days since it happened. They just came in a few hours earlier. Tsunade-sama's been on her toes trying to get her duties as Hokage done while keeping an eye on him. All our best medics are on the field and we only have a couple left and a few nurses. Things will go much better now that you are here. We were instructed to send any returning medics to the hospital immediately—what luck it was that you came in."

"Alright, thank you," Sakura replied in a professional sounding tone, "Return to your post and send more help as available."

The guard nodded and left just as they reached the hospital's front doors. Naruto looked like he was going to open his mouth and question Sakura, but she strode briskly through the front doors, leaving no time for inquiries. She crossed the linoleum floor and spoke with the woman behind the counter and received one sentence of information. Sasuke tried to ignore the smell of the hospital as he followed Sakura to the elevators, Naruto asking questions the entire way.

He observed as Sakura swiped a cardkey through the slot on the inside of the door and pushed the fifth number in the elevator door. The fifth floor—wasn't that where the emergency or unusual cases

were sent? Sasuke remembered something of the sort, and whatever had happened was very bad.

"You guys didn't have to come," she said to them as the doors rumbled shut, "I probably should have said something earlier, but..."

"Sakura-chan, will you tell me who on earth is injured?" Naruto asked, for what seemed like the twentieth time since they came through the hospital doors, "What's going on?"

"Well, technically, I'm not supposed to tell you," she said with an air of uncertainty, "But I suppose it could concern you. A rescue team came back a few hours earlier today and the person they rescued was badly injured. And they need all available personnel to help keep this person alive because the intelligence they acquired is invaluable."

"Who is it?" Sasuke asked bluntly, even though he knew Sakura would probably outright refuse to tell him, "How does this concern Naruto?"

There was a stoic silence from Sakura. He wasn't all that surprised, actually, he had expected her to refuse or simply not to answer at all. Naruto looked frustrated, but he did not push it further either. The elevator rumbled to a halt as they came to the fifth floor.

"It's Jiraiya-sama," she replied tonelessly just before the elevator doors opened.

Sasuke was more surprised that she actually told them than hearing it was Jiraiya, however Naruto was victim of an entirely different kind of surprise. The fox-faced boy leapt out of the elevator after her with his eyes wide.

"Ero-sennin?!" he exclaimed, concern marring his face severely, but Sakura was already back to ignoring him.

She walked up to a nurse who had come forward with a clipboard, and took it from her. "What's the status of the patient?" she asked, scanning the clipboard, seeming oblivious that he and Naruto were standing idly behind her.

"Sakura-ch—?"

"He's growing weaker, but we've slowed the process down," the nurse replied, "He's in room five hundred fifty six."

"Thank you," Sakura replied, walking on down the hall, the clipboard firmly in front of her face.

"Do you need anything?"

"Take these two to a waiting room and make sure they are comfortable," Sakura replied, not looking up.

"But Sakura-chan—!"

"Naruto, no," Sakura dropped the clipboard to her side and gave him a powerful look, "All you can do is wait. It sucks, but when it's all you can do, do it without question."

"But—"

Sasuke put a hand on his best friend's arm, shaking his head firmly when he received the questioning look. Sakura was in her element here, he could tell she knew what she was doing, and anything she said was law in this place. He and Naruto would not interfere, and he tried to convey that as best he could by turning his head towards her, his expression serious. She gave him a grateful look.

"Go."

She didn't need to be told twice. She whirled on the spot, striding down the hallway with a purpose to her step, leaving he, Naruto and the nurse behind. Naruto watched her go and then finally looked away when she had rounded a corner and disappeared from sight.

The nurse's expression was sympathetic, but she didn't say anything to the two of them in regards to what had just transpired.

"Please follow me," she told them politely, turning and heading the opposite way.

Sasuke let go of Naruto's arm and followed as well, with his best friend trudging solemnly beside him. His chakra was glum, and anxious, but Sasuke did nothing about it, Naruto would be fine. He knew his best friend better than that, even if Naruto was so down that he didn't even say a word to the nurse when she stopped them in front of a room across from the elevators. Sasuke muttered an awkward thank you while Naruto pushed past him and opened the door.

There were already two people inside, Sasuke knew, and he didn't recognize their signatures, but intended on finding out who they were when he entered the room. He followed Naruto and observed the room. It wasn't fancily furnished; two couches sat opposite one another over a low coffee table, and a few pictures decorated the walls. What the pictures depicted was invisible to Sasuke, as he just sensed the blank surface of the glass. Along the left wall, there was a countertop with a sink, some cupboards above. A coffeemaker sat next to the sink on the counter and was brewing some coffee already when they entered.

"Naruto, Sasuke! I wasn't expecting you two to be here this late at night," one of the room's occupants said with mild surprise as they entered. It was Hatake Kakashi, "I guess you heard the news then..."

Naruto mumbled a response and gave a glum nod; he slumped over to one of the couches and sat on the far end not looking at anyone present. Sasuke followed suit except he sat at the other end of the couch from Naruto, across from Kakashi. Meanwhile, the other person in the room, who had been standing by the coffeemaker acknowledged him too. It was Mitarashi Anko.

"Hey, Uchiha, Uzumaki," she said with a tired looking smile, "Been a while."

"It's good to see you up and about, Sasuke," Kakashi commented in a cheerful voice, though his chakra signature was coming across as slightly anxious, "You're in much better condition than when I last saw you."

"I'll say," Anko said coming around with a cup of coffee and sitting next to Kakashi, "You seem to be getting around very well even though you've lost your eyesight. Your rehabilitator did an excellent job, though I can't imagine it's been easy. How've you been, hun?"

"Fine," Sasuke replied somewhat truthfully; he was still a upset with what Sakura had done a few days previously, but he was alive and in relatively good health, not only that, but further progress had been made in his vision, and now when he had his eyes open, some very faint shapes could be made out, though there were no signs of colour. Fine seemed to be the best description of what he was feeling.

"I hear that Sakura moved in with you, against everyone's thoughts on the suggestion," Kakashi said conversationally, "How is that working out for you two?"

"Things are going well; it benefits us both, I believe," Sasuke replied carefully. He knew he was still going home with Sakura that evening, but he wasn't exactly looking forwards to living with her for the next few days. Up until that point, things *had* been going well, and he didn't want them to go differently, even though he found it hard to ignore what she had done at the moment.

"Really?" Kakashi sounded surprised, though whether it was genuine surprise or not, Sasuke could not tell, "I would have thought she would have been out of there in a week. What with you both being so stubborn and all."

Kakashi chortled appreciatively at his own joke, and though Sasuke knew he had meant well with the comment, he was a little affronted with the remark. Sakura had been very patient with him, he knew, and more than once he had acted out of line, but did people really think that they wouldn't have been able to stand each other? Well, he thought he wouldn't be able to stand her...but she loved him, and he knew that she would stay until the very end.

"It's only a temporary arrangement, yes," Sasuke remarked lightly, managing to keep the insulted tone from his voice, so that Kakashi didn't notice, "But she'll leave when we both see fit that it's time for her to go."

"Really now?" Kakashi sounded surprised again, "An interesting arrangement."

"I won't keep her against her will, but she is not to feel unwelcome," Sasuke replied evenly.

There was a pause from Kakashi, "You've grown up—a lot—Sasuke. It makes me realize how little I know you know; it makes me wish I could have been on your mission with you. Unfortunately, I had other places to be."

"Hey, Kakashi-sensei," Naruto said from the far end of the couch, speaking for the first time since they had come into the room to wait, "What happened on your mission? Why is Ero-sennin dying?"

Kakashi let out a hefty sigh, "Here, Anko, I've done most of the talking so far. Why don't you tell them? Or at least start?"

Anko took a long draught from her coffee and then set the mug down on the table with a 'thunk'. After reclining back on the couch, she crossed her legs and sighed heavily.

"For a few months now, Jiraiya-sama has been monitoring the movements of Akatsuki," Anko started, and immediately Sasuke began paying close attention.

Even though he knew that Itachi was not at the hideout, whatever information he could get on Akatsuki would be helpful for him to find his brother in the future. He was suddenly very interested in what Anko had to tell them, whereas before he didn't really care all that much; he was only there because he would walk Sakura home and because Naruto was so obviously crushed by what had happened. He didn't let his sudden interest show, of course; he was well practiced in concealing his emotions, and for a good reason. He knew that Kakashi would most definitely notice any change in his interest and probably tell the Hokage. He couldn't have that, because he knew that the Godaime would not let him go out and seek revenge, not for a very long time at least; precious time—windows of opportunity for any tragedy.

"He had been out of the village for some time and we had been receiving periodic reports on the group's movement and keeping us apprised of anything that would suggest a threat to us. So far they have done nothing to provoke us, and we are not yet in a position where we could turn attention entirely to them. For the most part we've left them be, but we're still keeping an eye on them. However, couple a weeks ago, the reports we were receiving, stopped," Anko continued, putting nudging her coffee mug away from the table's edge with her foot, "Of course we didn't worry about it too much at first. Considering where Jiraiya-sama was posted, it is difficult to send in reports without being noticed, so we assumed that he was lying low for the moment. We would have waited for a much longer period of time...but then Tsunade-sama won the lottery."

Sasuke raised his eyebrows. The Hokage won the lottery? So what? He failed to see what that had to do with anything; was the Hokage going to pay them overtime for starting their search early or something? But judging by the serious looks worn by Kakashi and Anko, and the stony look that Naruto suddenly took, winning the lottery was apparently a very sobering event.

Kakashi noticed his slightly raised eyebrows and explained, "You weren't around long enough after Tsunade became Hokage to know

that she has a horrible gambling addiction and the worst luck in all shinobi nations. Before she became Hokage, she was known as the Legendary Sucker because of her reputation for losing. But when she wins at anything, it goes against her usual streak, and she often grows worried. And more often than not, she has a right to be anxious."

Sasuke thought it somewhat ridiculous that winning the lottery was an indication of trouble, but he gave a nod and Anko resumed her tale.

"Almost immediately after she realized she won the lottery, Tsunade-sama summoned Kakashi, Haruno Kisho, and myself to her office and sent us to check up on him, telling us to assume the worst."

Haruno Kisho. Not a hard name for Sasuke to remember. Only too well did he remember Sakura's father's criticizing voice, his disapproving demeanor and his irritating presence. He remembered that the Hokage said that he had been on a mission with Kakashi, and that was why Kakashi was unable to join Team Seven on their own mission, but he did not sense the presence of the Haruno near them in the hospital. Knowing what little he did about Sakura's father, he had probably gone home already and was soundly asleep while the rest were awake waiting to see how the Hermit Sannin would do.

"We arrived in the area within a couple weeks and found evidence that there had been a search conducted in the area where Jiraiya was monitoring, but they must have assumed that he was alone, because the evidence was old, and we didn't run into anyone while we stayed there. Of course the entrance to Akatsuki's hideout must be well hidden in order to prevent any unwanted guests from paying a visit. And after a few days we managed to find it. I can't tell you how long we thought up a way to find Jiraiya-sama, and then get him out, but we finally agreed to make our way inside and try and find him before we ourselves were found," here Anko paused and turned towards her right, where their old sensei was lounging, "Kakashi, you wanna take over now, I want more coffee."

"Oh, you mustn't stop there, Anko. You get many more details than I ever would," Kakashi said lightly, "I should get you to write my mission reports for me."

"No way," Anko retorted with a playful frown, and Sasuke could tell that the two of them were very good friends. Much like he and Sakura had become over the past few months. Just the way that Kakashi and Anko were acting towards one another now reminded him of how Sakura would treat him at times. Before the bickering could continue, Sasuke cleared his throat slightly.

"How did you find Ero-sennin?" Naruto asked, seeming to have perked up slightly now that his mind was somewhat kept off the current situation and focused more on what had happened before.

"Well, Jiraiya-sama *is* one of the legendary sannin, and many know who he is," Anko said, seeming to resign to the fact that Kakashi would not be taking up the tale in her stead, "So where you do lock up a potentially dangerous person who you don't want to escape and you don't want to be found?"

Naruto thought about it for a minute and then thoughtfully he said: "In the most secure place, out of reach."

"Yep, so we figured that he'd be in the deepest part of the dungeon, which meant we'd have to be stealthy enough not to be found when we were going down there," Anko replied leaning back against the couch again, "Getting down was not that difficult even though Kakashi's book fell out of his pocket when we were clinging to the ceiling with our chakra."

"I managed to catch it though," Kakashi replied in a wounded tone.

"And if you hadn't, it would have hit that passing person on the head," Anko said reproachfully, "But other than that, we ran into few people. And getting Jiraiya-sama out of the cell wasn't that hard, because while there was a seal on it, you don't want to make it too complicated to open otherwise it becomes a pain to feed and

interrogate your prisoners. It was as we were making our way back that we ran into problems. I don't know what happened, I don't think any of us managed to find out what it was, but somehow or another, it came to their attention when Jiraiya-sama was loose."

"We had to make it out of there fast, and it was a little difficult considering Jiraiya's state," Kakashi cut in, sounding grave again, "It was obvious he had been tortured, and poisoned somehow or another, and it was slow going. We managed to make it out of the complex alive but we had the whole hideout on our tails."

"Oh, feel like story telling now?" Anko commented, but Kakashi ignored her.

"We all ended up separated and I think it was you Anko, who had Jiraiya for a time while we tried to throw them off," Kakashi turned to her at this.

"Yeah, Pakkun did a lot in the way of helping us though," Anko replied, and then looked over at Sasuke and Naruto again, "It was the most chaotic night you can imagine. It was getting dusky and there was snow on the ground everywhere, and I think that if a blizzard hadn't picked up we would have been caught for sure."

"At one point I thought you had been caught, there was a lot of noise and shouting. And hundreds of paper bees flying about and trying to sting us," Kakashi said with a reflective tone, "I don't think that every member of Akatsuki was there, because we *did* manage to get away."

"So what'd you do after you got away?" Naruto pressed, "Did you know what was wrong with Ero-sennin?"

"Other than he was poisoned, we knew very little," Anko replied picking up her coffee mug and heading towards the coffee machine, "We laid low for a couple of days, just to make sure that we weren't being followed, but after that we hurried back as quickly as possible, cutting our travel time down to a third of what it took to get up there."

"That's a record, I think," Kakashi replied, pulling out his book and turning to a dog-eared page, "Anyways, that's how it went. And here we are, home a few hours and waiting to see what the turnout will be. I certainly hope that Sakura manages to save him, because not only is his information of great value, but he left his last book with a slight cliffhanger."

Naruto only sighed and went back to sitting tensely on the corner of the couch. The time ticked away slowly and nobody spoke much. Mitarashi Anko offered Kakashi some coffee, a couple times, and was fairly insistent, but Kakashi had none. Sasuke personally thought that she was trying, as many had been for years, to try and find out what was under Kakashi's mask. But after that there was little talk, and Sasuke became immersed in his own thoughts. He certainly hoped that the Sannin would pull through as well, for he was greatly interested in what he could learn, even if it was not for his ears to hear.

Maybe he could tell how he was doing, Sasuke thought suddenly. It wouldn't come as a surprise to him as he knew that while in semi-conscious, unconscious or injured states, there was a difference in the chakra signatures. He couldn't have helped but notice it more in the hospital, as there were strange signatures everywhere. There was a whole range of activity in the signatures, some flickering from barely alive to those that were flaring actively while assisting the body to heal.

As he navigated his awareness through the scattered signatures of the hospital, he finally located Sakura's in the general direction of where they had last been with her. He paid attention to her signature for a while, and he could tell that she was using her own chakra at the moment, as it was being expended upon a faint signature nearby. He could gain no information from this scenario though, other than the fact that the patient was still alive. He soon directed his attention elsewhere, for a watched pot never seems to boil.

About an hour had passed when finally Sakura's signature drew near to them, and a few minutes later, the door opened to reveal a very

tired looking Sakura standing in the doorway. Naruto was immediately on his feet.

"How is Ero-sennin?" the fox-faced boy demanded with an air of worry in his voice.

Sakura tried to smile, but other than her lip twitching slightly, her tired expression seemed unchanged, "He's had all the poison removed from his system, but he's an old man, Naruto. It'll take him a few days longer to recover than it took Kankuro-san."

"But he'll live, right?" Naruto asked, seeming too apprehensive to apply what Sakura was saying.

"Yes, he'll live."

"Well done, Sakura," Kakashi praised, his face breaking into what Sasuke assumed was a smile, by the way crow's feet appeared at the corner of his eye, "If anyone could have done it, it would have been you."

"You give me too much credit, Kakashi-sensei," Sakura replied with a more successful attempt at a smile, "Tsunade-sama managed to find time to come and assist me for a time. I couldn't have done it without her help."

"The Hokage was in?" Anko asked, sounding surprised at this news.

"Yes, she was," Sakura confirmed with a tired air in her voice, "She would have come and said hello to everyone if she had time. But she told me to tell you two to have your mission reports in no later than two days from now. And as for you—" she turned to Sasuke at this point "—she wants you to go to ANBU Headquarters for questioning on what you've remembered during our mission."

Sasuke gave a nod to show that he had understood her. He wasn't surprised that he had been asked to do something of the sort, but that did not mean that he was pleased about the notion. He hadn't

really liked the rough tone that had been used in his first three questionings months ago, and he wasn't looking forward to another session. He doubted that the fact that he had behaved himself and not run off during the mission would gain him any better treatment or respect.

"Is it alright if we see Jiraiya-sama now?" Anko asked, getting to her feet and putting her empty coffee mug on the table.

"He's in no condition to be giving out information, if you were hoping to get something from him before tomorrow. It'll be quite impossible as he is unconscious at the moment," Sakura replied with a shrug, "You're welcome to see him, but unless he wakes up, I don't think you'll get much out of the visit."

"I don't care," Naruto stated determinedly, "Just seeing him okay will be enough for me. Where is he?"

"Next door, actually... It used to be Sasuke's room when he was here at the hospital."

Naruto was out the door before she finished her sentence, and Anko was close behind.

"We won't try to disturb him, Sakura," Kakashi assured her as he had noticed the expression of concern on her face as the other two had left.

Then Kakashi, too, left the room. Only Sasuke and Sakura remained in the room now. Getting to his feet, Sasuke stood for a moment while Sakura seemed to pause; she had been a little hesitant around him after she had prevented him from attacking his brother. He knew that she wasn't sure if he was still mad at her—which he wasn't, exactly—and had been careful not to get too close to him or pay too much attention to him. The amount of physical contact between them had been cut back tremendously, and Sasuke was perfectly alright with this. He should have never allowed himself to get so close to her—it was too dangerous now. He couldn't undo how much Sakura

knew about him, or how much he had come to know her, but he could distance himself a little, and make it appear that he didn't care. She would be a little safer that way.

"You didn't have to stay and wait for me," she said after a moment, "While I was working, I mean."

"I waited because Naruto did," he replied with an indifferent tone. That wasn't entirely true, and he knew it, but even if he knew it wasn't the whole truth it would help if he told himself it was. That was what he thought, because it was the only way that he knew of.

"Oh, I see," she replied, her face barely changing at the remark, but he knew he had hurt her by being so brusque, but he couldn't even let her think that he cared about their friendship as much as he did, she would never be able to comprehend how dangerous that would be.

She turned and walked to the door, holding it open for him, but her face was still the same. Inwardly he frowned, maybe she had been around him too long—she was beginning to act like he did. Perhaps he had been too cold in telling her that he wasn't waiting for her, he didn't want to push everyone away, but he couldn't let them stay close. He crossed the room, an apology on his tongue, while he silently debated whether he should utter it or not. He never got a chance to, because as he grabbed the door to relieve her from having to hold it, she went out into the hall ahead of him. He shoved his hands in his pockets and thought obscenities to himself as he followed Sakura. He should have apologized—he wanted to and didn't want to, and he wasn't sure what to do.

Naruto was standing with Anko and Kakashi at the elderly Sannin's bedside but his chakra signature had perked up and was back to normal, over all, even though outwardly he still displayed signs of apprehension. Sakura let them stand there for a moment, allowing the three of them to recover from their worry, but she paid no attention to Sasuke as he came and stood beside her. The unconscious man was not any concern of Sasuke's, and at the

moment, he was not paying any attention to him, instead he was busy working out what he should do about Sakura. He wasn't used to being treated this way by her, and while he probably deserved it, he had not intended on upsetting her this much. He was faced with the dilemma of letting her know he was sorry without seeming to care. Maybe if he reached for her hand and gave it a quick squeeze... If he dropped it right away, then that should be okay, he decided.

Taking his hand out of his pocket, he moved to reach for her hand, but then she deliberately moved out of his reach, speaking with the other three, "Alright, you guys, we should go get some rest. He's fine now, Naruto, so don't worry. You can come visit in the morning."

"I think we'll stay for a few minutes longer," Kakashi said giving Team Seven a small wave before he sat down on one of the chairs in the room.

Naruto gave a nod and then slowly he turned towards them. Sakura gave a reassuring nod and then indicated that Sasuke should follow, but, much to the said Uchiha's irritation, she kept a distance between them that prevented him from coming close to touching her hand. Fine then, he thought sourly to himself as he shoved his hands in his pockets, if she wanted to be that way that was just fine. He and Naruto followed Sakura wordlessly out the door as she led the way from the room, all three of their minds heavily laden.

It was after that Team Seven had moved out earshot that Anko turned to Kakashi studying his masked face carefully. She had always liked Kakashi, and she had always trusted him to know what to do best in a situation, especially when he knew the situation better than she did. But despite this, she couldn't help but feel a little bewildered what he had done, or rather, what he hadn't done.

"You didn't tell her," Anko said carefully into the silence of the room.

Kakashi looked away from Jiraiya, and then met her gaze with his visible eye. He shook his head and looked briefly out the door that Team Seven had just exited from. Even though he was the same age as her, Anko couldn't help but think that he looked much older than his years at that moment.

"May I ask why?" she pressed, frowning slightly.

"Because, then she'll be able to get at least one last good night's sleep before she finds out."

A/N: I'm sure some of you are wondering what happened that Kakashi is not telling Sakura. I actually had a hard time deciding what it was myself, but all thanks to my editor, it was all solved. And now she blames herself for what happened, even though something bad was going to happen anyways XD

Editor's Note: IT'S ALL MY FAULT!!! (headwall)

Note to grumpy/anal readers (if you are neither, please disregard): You know, even though I don't like unwarranted criticism, I never delete anonymous reviews that have negative comments in them. Why? Because I feel that a strong author should take even the negatives in stride, and build the story stronger after that. It's like a bug hitting my windshield—a little disgusting and I'm more irritated than anything else. Also, to the anonymous person who called themselves 'Swan', don't bother to flame this story—you're just adding to my ever-growing review count, therefore causing people to perceive my story as 'popular', and then, as a result, you are helping to advertise my story even more. I'm really sorry that you seem to have a cactus up your ass—as it is probably giving you a rather sour outlook on life—and I'm even sorrier to say that you don't strike me as very bright, because surely you should realize flaming is pointless after the number of reviews people have left. If you hate Sakura, then don't bother reading any SasuSaku fics, oh, and another thing: grow up.

Chapter 38

A/N: Man, I am such a procrastinator... not that this chapter is any later than usual, it's just that I was hoping to get it typed earlier than I did. I'm horrible that way. I've been pulled all sorts of directions in regards to distractions. My friend introduced me to a Taiwanese drama called *Why Why Love?* And it's really good so far. 3 And then there's Japanese projects, and after school events. Not to mention that I sprained my thumb in karate, but that's just composed more of epic failure than pain. So. How's your life been?

I'd just like to thank everyone who supported me in response to the flamer, Swan. A lot of people are surprised that I get flames. Actually, I'm surprised too. Ah well, I've only had four it total...in comparison to how many reviews? I'm just really strict about flammers. I do my best to discourage them and eradicate them. The vast majority of people have been very supportive of me and have gained my respect from that.

A lot of people were very happy that I kept Jiraiya alive, and I'm glad I did too. A few people who have died in the manga won't die in this story. Jiraiya is one of them, Deidara is another one. Most of this is because ever since Sasuke blinded himself the events leading to these character deaths never happened. Ex. Sasuke never killed/absorbed Orochimaru, therefore Deidara has no reason to hate Sasuke. Viola!

I love how Nazalia-san described the upcoming angst: "It is coming with a airplane, flying over us; prepared to let the luggage rain down on us. What the hell."

Minor Disclaimer: The concept of nighttime being the time when the masks come off, that came from my editor. She spews some crazy philosophical stuff sometimes. I took notes the last time :p

Chapter Thirty-Eight: The Broken Mug

When Sakura pried her eyes reluctantly open the following morning, getting up was one of the last things she wanted to do. She was so very exhausted that she wanted to lie in bed for hours longer, even though she knew she should get up. She rolled over on her side so that she was facing her empty futon across the room for her. This was not an uncommon sight for her, as she normally found herself on the other end of the room by morning. And even though before the mission, Sasuke's nightmares had been getting better—she had only needed to come to his side once or twice a week—he had suffered from one of the worst one's yet last night.

She rolled onto her back again and propped herself up on her elbows. Sasuke was not present at that moment, she saw, which meant that he had yet to return from his "interview"—for lack of a better word—at ANBU headquarters. Feeling slightly chilled—as it was now deep in autumn and the summer temperatures were long gone—she wrapped her bathrobe more tightly around her and crawled between the vacant sheets. She should start hauling her blanket along with her while she made the four-meter trek from her futon to the bed.

Actually, the horror Sasuke had expressed in the throes of sleep frightened Sakura, as it was one of the worst he had had yet. He had only awoken once before from his nightmares, and that was the first night she had discovered his troubled sleep. At that time he had woken and in his sleepy confusion, confused her for his mother. But this time he had fully awoken, and sat rigidly upright in bed. He seemed confused, and his sightless eyes darted about in the room in a confused manner. The dim shapes that he claimed he could now see had probably only confused him, for he didn't seem to realize he was still mostly blind.

Earlier that evening when he had told her that he did not stay because of her, she had been so bitter about it because she knew that it wasn't true. She had no way of being certain, yet somehow

she knew, and the fact that he had lied to her about it had made her angry. Did their relationship mean nothing to him? Of late, he was certainly treating it as something valueless. But despite her anger towards him earlier, she knew it would be downright wrong to leave him suffering in his sleep, and so she stole over to his side, her unconditional love for him allowing her to disregard her anger towards him.

He had tensed when she drew near, and had tried to hide his shaking hands from her by clenching fistfuls of blanket in his hands. Though he had said nothing to her at the time, Sakura knew that she would not miss the mark by much if she were to hazard a guess that the recent encounter with Itachi had some influence on how bad the nightmare had been. This recent encounter had also triggered something from Sasuke beside the nightmares—his recent behaviour.

He was probably still upset with her from a few days previous, so her observations could be incorrect, but Sasuke had been distancing himself a little from her. She wasn't sure if it was because he was angry with her at the moment, or if she had seriously overstepped a line. He had not reacted at all to her when she had sat down on the edge of his bed, and only moved to flinch away when she reached out to touch him. There was a struggle painted so vividly on his face in the moonlight that spilled through the windows, and it was a long while before he turned his head towards her.

The second time she had reached for him, he did not shy away, though it was like he was afraid to let her touch him, though she could not figure out why he would be. He had taken a couple of calming breaths as she pulled him back to lean on her shoulder, and for a while afterwards he was stiff and tense. After all the time they had spent together, and the comfort between them when it came to touch—had it all gone out the window? Had she ruined something? Her mind was eased slightly when he had uttered the only two words that he had spoke when he was awake: "Sing...please..."

So she had, and she didn't stop until she was certain that he was asleep again. It was some consolation that at least at night, when his inner horrors came to haunt him, the mask would fall away and even if he tried, he lacked that ability to hide his true self from her. Night was when the masks came off, when they could truly see what the other was.

Sighing, she rolled over in the bed and buried her face in Sasuke's pillow. They never talked about what happened at night, like it was forbidden ground to tread on. But she wished they could. She longed to know what he dreamed about, but knew better than to ask. The act of not mentioning it was to better protect them—so nobody found out about their relationship, nobody that wouldn't understand, at least. But things weren't kept simple by not talking.

Groaning, Sakura pushed herself up from the mattress; she should really get up. She glanced around for a clock, but didn't see one. They needed a clock, she thought absently.

She hauled herself to the bathroom and had a quick shower, all the while thinking about Sasuke. She sighed as she pulled on her clothing for the day and stumbled senselessly towards the kitchen. She glanced at the clock in there, and nearly dropped her teapot out of shock over how late it was. It was nine thirty—two hours later than she usually slept to. She had so many things to do that day and she'd wasted two precious hours. The laundry needed to be done, she needed to unpack her things, she also needed to mulch the flowerbeds, write her mission report and return some of the textbooks she had borrowed from the library. Now that Team Seven was reunited, they would now be expected to be available for regular missions—Sakura needed to get all her chores done before they were called away again.

All of this was running through her mind as she was brewing tea in the kitchen. She was just wondering if she dared wait another week or two—and risk all the plants freezing in an early frost—for mulching the garden, when she heard some distinct and sharp knocks on the back door. Nobody ever used the front door—not if they were here to

visit someone. Sakura abandoned her pot of tea and headed towards the front door. It wouldn't be Sasuke, because he would have no reason to knock.

Sakura stepped down amounts the shoes and slid open the door, only to find herself face to face with the bright orange cover of an Icha Icha Paradise book. Sakura took a step back and blinked in astonishment at finding Kakashi reading on the doorstep; she hadn't been expecting him, but it was a nice surprise.

"Ohayo, Kakashi-sensei," she said, still rather surprised by her teacher's appearance.

"Good morning, Sakura," he replied, snapping his book closed and looking at her, "How are you this morning?"

"I'm fine... Actually, I just got up," she replied, her manners returning to her, "I was just going to make some tea, do you want to come in?"

"I think I will, thank you," Kakashi said, stepping inside the door, tucking his book in his back pocket as he did so.

After he had removed his shoes, Sakura led him back towards the kitchen. She procured another mug and poured him a cup of tea—though he hadn't asked for one. She might as well and try get a look at his face while he was here. There was no way he could not drink the tea and not be rude, and she thought that Kakashi-sensei was more polite than that.

"Sasuke isn't here at the moment, he's still at his interrogation at ANBU headquarters," Sakura explained as she went to grab some snack foods. When she turned back to the table, Kakashi's mug was empty and his mask was on his face once more. Sakura stood for a moment in dumbfounded amazement as she wondered how he had drunk it so fast without burning himself.

"Oh, I see," Kakashi replied to her statement, and then he shook his head at Sakura gestured offer of more tea, "He's been there a while

then."

"Yes, but I expect him to be home soon, so if you stick around he'll probably show up," Sakura replied, pouring tea into her own mug, "But what brings you to this part of the village?"

"Just over to see how you two were doing," Kakashi replied, sounding offhand, but Sakura knew that that was hardly the real reason. The Uchiha manor was quite out of the way from any major buildings, and if Sakura remembered correctly, Kakashi lived on the other end of town, "How have you been, Sakura? I didn't really get a chance to catch up with you last night."

"Oh, I've been fine," Sakura replied, completely unaware that she had given the same response as Sasuke. She clasped her hands around the warm mug of tea, "Tired mostly, but what can you expect after coming home from traveling?"

"Only fine?" Kakashi's voice was inquiring.

"Yeah...is there a problem?" Sakura asked, confused.

"Well, I just want to know how you feel about living with Sasuke. I'm sure at times it can be difficult."

"Kakashi-sensei, it was part of the job to live here when I told Tsunade-sama that I wanted to rehabilitate Sasuke. And I'm still here because there's more that I can do," Sakura replied not entirely offended by the remark, but was dumbfounded by it, "We respect one another and that gets us by. Things aren't perfect, I'll admit, but are things ever completely perfect when people live together? Getting Sasuke accustomed to his blindness has been a challenge for both of us, but in the process I think we've come to know one another better than we ever have in the past."

"I see," Kakashi said sounding entirely convinced, "I didn't mean to sound offensive, it's just that it seemed to me that there was a little

tension between the two of you last night. I just wanted to check that things were okay."

Sakura felt her grasp tighten on her mug as she stiffened. "...Yes, there is a bit of tension between us at the moment, but Sasuke will come around," she replied uncertainly, she was unsure how to handle the question. She knew that Sasuke would probably come around later rather than sooner, but... "If he doesn't, then he hasn't grown at all since we were twelve years old."

"Yes, I'm sorry, Sakura, I should have realized that," Kakashi explained, sounding earnestly apologetic, "I was concerned, that's all."

Sakura looked away from Kakashi and down at her mug, "At the moment, there is a little tension, yes. We had a fight on the mission, and well...Sasuke isn't taking it well."

"What happened?"

"We ran into Akatsuki members going the opposite direction when we were returning home—two of them," Sakura replied and she knew Kakashi was alarmed, so she added, "They wanted nothing to do with us, and they didn't wish to engage in combat with them. However, Sasuke and Naruto had different ideas. Sasuke's mad at me because of how I handled the situation. You see, one of the two members we ran into, was Uchiha Itachi."

Kakashi's single visible eye widened when Sakura looked up at him again, "How did you deal with the situation?"

"I knocked both Sasuke and Naruto out and carried them as far away from Itachi as I could," Sakura replied grimly, "He didn't try to stop me, because he didn't want to fight with us, but Naruto and Sasuke weren't happy when I woke them up."

"I see," Kakashi closed his eye, "I can't imagine they'd be happy. But I think you did what was best, considering the circumstances. You're

just lucky that they didn't want to come after Naruto. Ever since we rescued the Wind Country's Kazekage, I think all of us are better learned in what Akatsuki is capable of. In your position, I probably would have done the same."

"Naruto agrees that I did the best thing, but he doesn't believe what I did was right," Sakura said solemnly, "But the encounter didn't go over well with Sasuke, and I'm still waiting for him to get past what I did. I don't expect him to forgive me right away, so right now I'm just giving him space and hoping that he'll come to terms with it."

"Are you all right with that?" Kakashi asked, opening his eye again, "It's probably not good to stay with him when he's angry. Sasuke can hurt people without realizing it, or can do it out of spite."

"Kakashi-sensei, I'm surprised you would suggest such a thing," Sakura frowned disapprovingly at him, "I know Sasuke could hurt me, but who couldn't potentially hurt others while they're angry? People get angry at each other; when they live in the same house, they have to get over it quicker. It's no different if I was angry at one of my family or if they were angry at me."

"I'm not sure whether to admire or be concerned about your level of tolerance," Kakashi said, shaking his head.

Sakura smiled at her old sensei, "It's called unconditional love."

Kakashi nodded in resignation, "Ah, right. I should have known. I keep forgetting how much you've grown from the little girl you once were all those years ago."

She smiled at him, and then took a sip from her tea. She changed the topic, "Anyways, I highly doubt that you have come here to find out about how I was doing. Or at least you hadn't come here to find out in that much detail...unless you were sent by my father."

She had meant the last part as a joke, but Kakashi seemed to take her comment seriously as he shook his head. He had grown very

grave all of a sudden and the look he gave her was solemn. Sakura was unsure what to make of this, and she wasn't sure whether she should be worried or not.

"No, you're right, Sakura, there is another reason why I'm here," Kakashi replied honestly, "There is something I need to tell you."

Sasuke was on his way home from the interrogation, taking the familiar route back from ANBU Headquarters to his house. How many times had he taken this road as a boy? He couldn't count the number of times he had been down it with Itachi. But even though the route was familiar, things had changed significantly since the last time he had walked down this path. Perhaps for the better, he didn't want to have to think about the past at that moment, considering that he was already in a relatively good mood. He was actually in a better mood than he had expected to be upon leaving the ANBU Headquarters.

At first things hadn't gone so well, as Sasuke was made to wait half an hour to be seen. And then he was taken to see a rather mistrustful man named Danzo before he finally found himself sitting across from another man who went by the name of Yamato. Sasuke knew that Yamato was not the real name of the ANBU, because he knew that all ANBU members had a second name to go by. When Itachi had been a member of ANBU—before he had slaughtered the clan—he too had a second name. But this Yamato turned out to be a very decent man who was polite and respectful as he asked further questions ranging from how the barkeep of the farming village was involved to every recalled detail about the Chakra Oscillation Project. When they were finished, he thanked Sasuke sincerely for the information he had given him and wished him a good day. This had left Sasuke in a relatively good mood.

As he wandered homewards, he found himself wondering what he would do when he got home. He hadn't really thought about it, as they had just come home; he wondered if Sakura was still asleep after coming home so late last night. She had been exhausted when

they returned from the hospital, so he supposed that she would still be. Especially after she had woken up when he had had his nightmare; actually he had been surprised that she had woken up at all, he noted in retrospect, but then again, it had not been one of his better ones. It probably didn't help that she seemed to have become more sensitively attuned to the first signs of his nightmares. He always felt relieved whenever he felt her draw near, and even though he had actually woken this time, it had been no different. She had reminded him that it really had been a dream, and it always took a huge burden off his heart to know she was still alive.

But even though she had been right there next to him, he wasn't sure whether to let her hold him like she always did. The dream had only enforced what he had been thinking the past few days, but after a while, the aftermath of the nightmare had been too difficult to deal with, and he had succumbed to his body's shaking yearning to lean on her to know that she was real.

He had dreamed Itachi had killed all of Konoha, and left his brother's twelve-year-old self to find it. And as he ran through the streets towards the Uchiha manor, not only had he found the dead members of his clan, but his friends and associates from now. Miratashi Anko, the Fifth Hokage, Hyuuga Neji, Maito Gai's pet pupil, Hyuuga Ibane...people who had helped him, in their small ways, to grow stronger in his state. And as he pushed on beyond these people trying to ignore the horror that struck him each time, he always felt he was not going fast enough. The last part of his dream had been when he pushed open the door to the room where he expected to find his parents dead, but it had been different this time. He had arrived just in time to watch Itachi kill both Naruto and Sakura. He had woken up after that; even though he was relieved to find it only a dream, he wished now that he hadn't woken Sakura as well.

Sasuke pursed his lips as he walked, he knew that Sakura had been angry with him for his cold dismissive attitude, but she had still come to his side. He didn't know what to make of that, or do about it. The action had not thrown him off a little, it had totally confused him—it

was with wry amusement that he found her doing that more and more to him as the weeks had passed. Where before he would have known what to do about the situation, he no longer could find the answers. In a previous time he would have pretended like nothing was wrong, and it would have been that simple, but things were much more complicated. Not only did he not know what to do, but he also didn't know what to think anymore. He didn't want to have to be close to Sakura, but he couldn't *not* be close to her. Trying to push her away was hurting him as much as it was hurting her. He didn't want to have to hang around her and risk getting closer to her, but it was getting so that he couldn't be without her.

He turned the corner that led to the Uchiha Complex, still brooding over what to do. He used to be able to plan three steps ahead of whatever challenged faced him, and now he found himself making it up as he went along. He supposed the best thing to do at the moment was just let things be they were—he couldn't help the fact how much Sakura had come to know him, and he couldn't change how much her trust meant to him. The best thing he could do was to keep things from getting worse, and not letting anyone know how much his friendship with Sakura meant to him. He owed it to Sakura to treat her better than he had been lately, but he would take a step back from how close they were. Just one step, instead of the mile he had tried to put between them.

As for what he would do when he went home, he could sense that Sakura was up and about, now that she was in range, and she had company. He couldn't tell for sure, but he was pretty certain it was Kakashi; he hadn't spent enough time around Kakashi to be entirely sure that it was his old sensei's chakra signature, but he didn't think that he was wrong. After Kakashi left, maybe he would tell her to write their mission reports with him. She would know it was his way of apologizing, if apologizing was the best word to describe it. That way they could—

Sasuke stopped dead in his tracks. The strangest thing had happened, though it was not one of those strange things that was

considered an interesting thing, this was a strange thing that spelled out alarm to Sasuke in large bold letters. When he had first picked up on Sakura's chakra signature, it had been completely normal—overall it was cheerful, serene, and content. What had happened could only be accurately compared to someone dropping a mug of tea—the crockery would shatter, and the tea would spill, going cold shortly after. That was what had happened to Sakura's chakra signature, it had suddenly changed drastically, her mood had shattered with shock and then gone cold with despair.

Without even thinking, Sasuke bolted into a run, and then within a few seconds got impatient with his speed, so he applied chakra to his feet to repel the ground. No matter how fast he was moving, he didn't feel like he was going fast enough, and then there were all the people on the streets. He took the roof of the nearest building and began cutting across the neighbourhood, cutting his distance in half. He did not know what could have caused Sakura's mood to change so drastically, and it was not a temporary mood, it was an overall mood—one that she felt in her very core.

He sensed Sakura and Kakashi begin to move in the house and as Sasuke landed firmly on the veranda outside the back door, Kakashi was standing in the area where the shoes would have been left. Sasuke dashed across the wooden planks and threw the back door open, to discover Kakashi had been reaching for it on the other side. Sakura appeared by Kakashi's side looking mildly surprised to see him.

"Sakura, what's wrong?" Sasuke demanded, refusing to move out of Kakashi's way until he found out precisely what was wrong.

"Nothing is the matter, Sasuke," she replied, surprise etching itself further into her face, "Kakashi-sensei just came over for some tea this morning, why should anything be wrong?"

She was lying, she just had to be, he thought with certainty. If she wasn't then everything he had learned about chakra over that past

few months with her would have been completely false discoveries. He refused to believe for a moment that nothing was wrong.

"Sakura, are you okay?" Kakashi asked, turning his head towards Sasuke, and then at Sakura. Judging by his voice, Sasuke determined that he had felt nothing was wrong before, but the question that she had been asked caused him to wonder if he had missed something.

"Kakashi-sensei, I assure you that I'm fine," Sakura said with a firm voice, "At any time did I act like I wasn't alright?"

Sasuke stopped himself from narrowing his eyes. It was a trick question, he concluded, for even though she might have acted like she was okay, it didn't necessarily mean that she was fine. She was proving it to him right now, as he stood on the back veranda practically face to face with her.

"No, I suppose you didn't," Kakashi said with an air acceptance, "Thank you for the tea this morning, Sakura. And hopefully the next time I see you will be under better circumstances."

Better circumstances? That sent off warning bells in Sasuke's head. What better circumstances? But Sakura gave no outward indication that she had been affected by Kakashi's words.

"I hope so, too," she said politely, her voice slightly more formal than usual, Sasuke noticed, "Please take care of yourself, and notify me if you hear anything."

"Will do," he said, looking at both of them, "Ja ne."

He gave a small wave and then disappeared in a cloud of smoke, leaving Sasuke and Sakura alone on the porch. Sasuke did his best to give Sakura a stern look, but after spending so much time with her, she seemed be immune to whatever looks he gave her.

The look she gave him was a normal one and she said with an offhand tone: "Welcome home. I just made some tea, would you like some?"

A hundred words and demands swirled through his head, some almost reaching his mouth, but they recoiled once again. He stood there for a few seconds trying to think of what to say but when he did speak, it lacked everything that he wanted to say.

"Aa."

She gave a nod and disappeared back into the house, while Sasuke stood on the porch mentally kicking himself. Regaining his inward composure, he went inside as well, kicking off his shoes and closing the door with more force than was probably necessary. So much for the relatively good mood he had been in earlier that day; Sakura's depressed chakra signature was very distracting and it was bothering him to no end to know what was bothering *her* .

He sat down at the kitchen table while Sakura was at the counter pouring some tea into a new mug; Sasuke took the time to note everything he could about her behaviour. If she was really as cheerful as she pretended to be, she would have been humming to herself, he deduced, though he had no real way of telling whether she would have actually been humming or not. But other than that, he couldn't tell that there was anything outwardly different about her. He himself had learned that habit when he was eight years old, and he knew that if one tried hard enough, they could ignore whatever was making them depressed, even if they still felt depressed. If he were to remind her then maybe she would do something to indicate something that would confirm she was... He paused. He knew for a fact that she was upset, he didn't need to confirm it, what she needed to do was get *her* to admit it.

"So, what did Kakashi want to talk about?" he asked her as she turned around from the counter.

The mug of tea slipped from her hand and broke on the floor with a loud crash. Sakura swore and quickly grabbed a tea towel from the sink without stepping on any of the broken pieces on the floor.

Sasuke in the meantime had gotten up and helped her pick up the pieces while she mopped up the tea.

"I'm sorry, Sasuke," she apologized, looking ashamed, "I'm so clumsy sometimes. I don't know if I'll be able to find one that matches your set, but I can take a look next time I'm out shopping."

He shook his head at her, "Don't worry about it. It's not important—there are still more. Did you cut yourself?"

"No, but still..."

"Don't bother," Sasuke stated firmly, taking the collected pieces and putting them aside. He wasn't concerned about the mug all that much, what held his attention was the fact that she had dropped it at the moment he had asked what Kakashi had wanted. Even now, he could sense her hands shaking ever so slightly as she mopped the floor. And even when she stood up to wring out the cloth over the sink, he could see her shaking ever so slightly.

"Why did Kakashi come over?" he asked again, sounding direct, as always, but this time Sakura did not react as she did last time.

"Oh, he just came over to say hi," Sakura replied sounding cheerful, even though her signature was flaring with anguish as she spoke, "Wanted to see how we were doing, but you weren't here."

"He should have known I would have been out," Sasuke pointed out; her answer wasn't telling him enough, and he was determined to trap her so that she would tell him. She obviously didn't want him to know, otherwise she would have told him by now.

"Yes, but he thought you'd be back by then. It was two and a half hours later than when you were supposed to arrive," she replied, turning back to the counter and grabbing another mug. She poured

another cup of tea and set it on the table where he usually sat, "Here's your tea. I need to get some chores done, so I won't be joining you."

With that final statement, she walked calmly from the room without a glance back.

Over the period of the day, Sakura demonstrated normal behaviour, acting like she was completely fine, and to say the least, it was driving Sasuke absolutely crazy. She went about her day like nothing was the matter and even though her chakra signature was screaming at him that something was the matter, she never allowed him to see any indication of it. It got to a point where Sasuke had to sit down and pay close attention to her signature in order to be certain he wasn't losing his mind. But despite that, he had determined nothing new.

When he told that they should write their mission reports together in order to keep anything from being left out, there was a slight flicker in her chakra which he supposed indicated a relief of sorts—maybe she had realized that he was no longer angry at her. But whatever his words had meant to her, it had only given a split-second of consolation. She had been rather silent throughout the process, and only spoke to ask him questions on the accuracy of events; he wasn't really one to make conversation and he really had no idea what to say to start one. He had no way of devising a method of casually bringing the topic of Kakashi's visit up, and he still hadn't thought of anything to say by the time when Sakura finished her report. A healing session had followed, though Sakura hadn't made it all that long, wanting to get some chores done, she said, and he was unable to think of a way of stalling her when she told him in a completely normal voice that she was going to go outside and work in the garden for a bit.

He spent the rest of the morning training, and brooding over Sakura's hidden distraught emotions; they had effectively rid him of any good feelings he had been feeling that morning. And he was

beginning to notice that there was no way he could take a step back from their current relationship and find out what was wrong with her at the same time. He was beginning to wonder if he should maybe ignore it to the best of his ability and go about like he didn't know anything. He had toyed with the idea for a while and tried putting it into practice for a couple hours, but he just found that his concern for her was just beyond his ability to ignore. It was when he was going back inside that he confronted her about it; he had had enough with trying to casually bring it up, he was going to do this with his style of approach.

When he came in, he went directly to where he sensed her presence, his irritation guiding his resolve to confront her. He came across her walking out of their room holding a basket of laundry, making her way, no doubt, to wash it. Her face was impassive as she walked down the hall, thinking nothing of running into to him, but that all quickly changed as he came up to her. Before she could even think of anything to do otherwise, Sasuke had grabbed the laundry basket from her, turned around, set it on the floor away from her, and turned back in one single motion. He crossed his arms and gave her a very pointed look as alarmed surprise passed over her face.

"Sasuke, what are you doing?" she asked him, and even though he could not tell if she was meeting his gaze, he had a feeling that she wasn't, which angered him.

He took a few steps forwards, and Sakura, in clumsy uncertain motions, took an equal step back. And soon, Sakura had nowhere to go as she found herself backed up against the hall wall. She frowned at him and clenched her fists, glaring defiantly back at him. She opened her mouth to say something to him, but he knew it wasn't the answer to what he wanted to know, and so he slammed one hand against the wall, resting his palm against the wood surface. His nose was barely an inch away from hers, and he knew that even though his eyes were unable to make out her face, they were aligned with hers. He cut off his senses and focused on the blurred grey smudge that was her face.

"Tell me what is wrong, Sakura," he demanded in a severe whisper, "And don't you dare say that it's nothing."

She was silent for a long time after his words had been uttered and when she finally spoke she had to take a shuddering breath before she said anything. He activated his senses again to determine her expression, and finally she showed some signs of how she felt deep inside. While her face was stoic, it was a pained sort of blankness, like she didn't want to show him what lay behind her mask.

"My father didn't make it home with the team that rescued Jiraiya," she said very slowly, and her eyes filled with tears, "He's missing in action."

Sasuke hadn't really known what to expect, but he hadn't been expecting her to say that. He hadn't seen the man at the hospital and had immediately assumed that he had already returned home. He didn't know what to say to her, he had no reason to like Sakura's father, but he knew that even though that Sakura often complained about him, she had cared for him just as much as she had cared for her mother and brother. He knew why she was so upset now, it spelled it out perfectly for him now; the pain she was feeling was because of the loss of her father, and the unlikely event that she would ever get to see him again. In the shinobi world, to label someone missing in action, you might as well label them as killed in action, for the chances of someone who went missing to survive, was a very small chance.

"Now you know," she said calmly, "And if you'll excuse me, I still have to do the laundry."

With that, she ducked under his arm and picked the laundry basket up from the floor, pausing only to wipe the tears from her eyes before she continued down the hallway. Sasuke stayed rooted to the ground for a moment longer, watching her with his senses until she had gone around the corner. The depression he had caused her for two years during his absence, he had no idea what it had been like; watching her retreat from his stationary form only brought on horror

in realization to how she was acting despite how she felt. How long would it be before she gave way to that depression? If it was anything like how he had been after the Uchiha clan had been murdered, he only knew that concern wouldn't even begin to describe how he would feel about it.

Sakura had held out as long as she could that day, doing everything she could to prevent herself from showing the pain she felt to Sasuke. From the instant Kakashi had told her that her father had been separated from them during their mission, she had felt like her heart had been wrenched from her chest. She didn't blame Kakashi, nor did she blame Anko for what happened. Kakashi had certainly seemed worried that she might feel that way, but she knew that she could never do something like that. That was part of the risk that came with being an ANBU, people went missing, people died. The most dangerous missions were given to the most powerful for they were the most likely to succeed, but even so, the most powerful were still mortal.

She was lying on her futon in Sasuke's room, the blankets wrapped firmly around her, her own stubborn resolve keeping the floodgates from opening and allowing her to burst into tears. It was the fear of burdening Sasuke with her pain that allowed her to maintain the ruse of being alright, for he had enough on his plate already, what with the whole run-in with Itachi, and then being mad at her. But despite her efforts—and she didn't know how or when—he had noticed that something was wrong with her. She had been surprised by his confrontation, to say the least, and it had shaken her iron floodgates. She had weakened slightly. She wasn't going to let that happen again.

The amount of time she had spent lying in bed wasn't all that long, she had just crawled into her covers and gotten comfortable, so she took very little notice when Sasuke walked into the room, pulled back the covers, and crawled into bed. The only notice she really took of him was his presence, and as he stopped moving after finding a

comfortable position, she rolled onto her side to face the wall. It was only then that she let the tears begin to fall, when she was certain he wouldn't see her cry.

There were so many regrets that she had, each one weighing down on her heart. The last time she had seen her father was when he stayed over at their house to check up on her and Sasuke, and she wished she had treated him better. She had been resentful to him at the time, trying very hard not to lose her temper while her inner self abused him with a number of imagined weapons. She wished that she hadn't thought such things; he was only worried for her well being, like a good father would be. He was afraid for his daughter, his little girl, and she hadn't considered that at all.

And what about when she had been growing up? She remembered all the times that he went to the park with her, and pushed her on the swings, pushing her as high as she wanted to go, but never quite high enough. Or when he was done with his stuff from work how he would sometimes take her to buy an ice cream with Kanaye—even though she never got any ice cream, she had just wanted the cone, and her father had gotten one for her willingly. Or in the wintertime, who would pull her up the hill so that she could sled down to the bottom again? And now she might never see him again.

The tears were falling faster, though had managed to keep herself from sobbing, she wouldn't allow herself to sob until she was sure Sasuke was asleep. But even though she wanted to keep her grief silent, she couldn't keep her thoughts from continuing onwards, reminding her of how things had been and how they were now, and how she wished they could be.

She had hardly been a good daughter to him when she grew older. All of a sudden he wasn't the man that she wanted to spend time with anymore. Instead of the daughter who would always willingly agree whenever proposed with the prospect of having fun, she would haughtily refuse and look at him like he was crazy. No, she didn't want to go outside and help him garden; no she didn't feel like having ice cream, it was fattening anyways; go out for dinner as a

family, was he crazy? How easily she had forgotten how much her father had meant to her and she had thrown everything back at him in his face. Suddenly he wasn't as important anymore, the things that were important were boys, looking good, and clothes. Spending time with friends was much better than spending time with her family.

He had wanted her to be stronger, she knew, and whenever he had said she wasn't strong enough, or said that the marks in the Academy weren't as important as being able to apply the knowledge, he had only had her best interests at heart. Maybe if she could have been a bit stronger, or maybe if she had asked him for help, things could have been like they were before. Maybe instead of buying ice cream, they could have done target practice together; maybe they would be as close as they once had been. She wished she could change how things were, she wished she could be the loving daughter who loved spending time with her father, and she hated how it was only when she knew that she may never get the chance to change things, that she might never get to.

A quiet sob escaped her, and her body began to shake. Sasuke should be asleep by now, she thought to herself, it was probably okay, as long as she wasn't too loud, she could cry without him knowing. Another quiet sob escaped her, followed by another, until she was shaking all over with continuous sobs; they were quiet ones, but they allowed the pain to escape ever so slightly. Regret, sorrow and anguish were pressing heavily down on her body, and there seemed to be nothing she could do to be rid of it all. All her thoughts kept building the emotions, making them worse, and no matter how hard she cried, it seemed like she couldn't get rid of enough of them pain.

There was movement at the other end of the room, and Sakura froze, halting all her sobs instantly, though the tears continued to run. Sasuke could just be rolling over in his sleep, she thought to herself, but as the movements continued, she began to fear that wasn't the case. She held very still, straining her hearing, hoping that Sasuke would stop and just fall into a regular breathing pattern. He didn't

though, and instead she felt the floorboards shift beneath her futon as he stood up from his bed. Squeezing her eyes shut, she hoped he was just getting up to go to the bathroom and would think that she was asleep. There was pause in the room, and then Sakura heard a blanket being tugged from Sasuke's bed, followed by more shifting of the floorboards as Sasuke crossed the room.

Lying frozen on her futon, she didn't know what to think. What was he going to do? He knew that she wasn't asleep; it would be impossible to pretend so now, so she rolled over onto her back and looked up at him. There was a serious expression on his face when he knelt down on the futon, one that did not change as he sat down next to her, spreading his blanket over the both of them. She blinked at him a couple of times, wiping away her tears in shame, she had woken him with her crying; she was a fool to think that he wouldn't hear her. Hadn't his basic senses grown stronger since he had lost his sight? She should have remembered.

She opened her mouth to utter an apology, to tell him that he didn't need to sit with her, that she would be okay, but she never got a chance to. Lying down next to her, he pulled her into his arms and held her; all her words were lost then as all the tears came back anew, and seized her. She found herself sobbing again, but somehow she found that it hurt less and more at the same time when Sasuke was there. Relief took her too as she knew that he was no longer angry with her, easing some of the pain she had been feeling already, but she felt an additional burden when she realized she was giving him her pain to bare as well as his.

She didn't know how or when she managed to fall asleep, but somehow she managed it, Sasuke holding onto her, letting her cry, his grasp never once loosening. And it was because of this that even though she was traumatized by the pain of losing her father, that she was able to get a relatively good night's sleep anyways.

A/N: Blame my editor for coming up with the brilliant idea of Sakura's father going missing, I love and worship her for it. I didn't want to say

he was dead, because that'd be clichéd, but twenty-six reviewers thought that he died anyways. (Only sixteen people got it right.) And I didn't want him to go in a coma because A) Tsunade could cure it anyways B) I would have no idea how it happened and C) clichéd again. I thought that having Sakura's father MIA was a brilliant idea, so be sure to congratulate my editor for filling in my plot hole, though it's probably killing her right now that it happened to him. :p

Editor's Note: (TEAAARS) MY FAULT. ALL MY FAULT.
(HEADWALL)

Note to other would-be flammers: I have a Zero-Tolerance Flame Policy. Unless you want to be publicly humiliated, I suggest you don't even go there.

Edit 02/08/08: Due to some concerns expressed by some readers, my response to the flamer has been removed. The last thing I want is to lose the respect of those who have supported me, but I still stand where I do about flammers. To those who did not agree with my methods, I'm sorry if I offended you, but one thing that I am not sorry about is how I handled the situation. How people handle flammers is a person's own personal preference, and if there's one thing that life's taught me, it's that you can't keep everybody happy; to each their own.

Chapter 39

A/N: For some unknown reason, I'm in an angsty mood today. I guess that's a good thing cause it'll help me write the following angst-ridden scenes. You have been warned. :p Note to those who have ended up crying because of my fic, I recommend that you grab a Kleenex box—I'm not making fun of you, I mean it, you might need the Kleenex box.

P.S. - Sorry for the delay in updating. I was out of town until very recently, and my flight was delayed by an hour before we left, so that's why this chapter wasn't up as soon as it usually would have been. Sorry everyone.

Chapter Thirty-Nine: Perspective

An odd silence that lingered quietly in the air was the thing that woke Sasuke. It was normally this quiet when Sakura slept, but it was because the room was so devoid of life that he woke. He opened his eyes and the faded grays of the indistinguishable room greeted him. Sakura's chakra signature was not in the immediate vicinity, but he could sense her elsewhere in the house. Propping himself up on his elbows, he noted that she was in the wrong place for the kitchen and there were no noises from the bathroom. He was confused as to where she was, but he felt he should go check on her, considering how she had been last night. He didn't need to simply realize he was on Sakura's futon in order to remind him how upset she had been.

Standing up, he made his way past the kitchen, tracking her signature; it was positioned so it was outside of the building, and he wondered if she was out in the yard. He was surprised she was outside at all, after she had broken down the previous night, he didn't think she'd want to go out just yet. He exited the back door without bothering to put on his shoes, and followed her chakra signature,

keeping to the wooden walkway as he went. And as he moved, a frown began to descend on his face.

As he drew nearer to her location, he began to realize where exactly she was located, and his stomach performed an unpleasant icy clench. He quickened his pace, hurrying down the wooden boards without making very much noise. His poor vision hid the room's door in the shadow of the overhanging roof, but he knew it was there with his chakra senses, and as he put his hand out to grasp the handle, he noticed the door wasn't closed properly.

Sakura's chakra signature was on the other side of that door, and it flickered forlornly, reflecting her despair. He hesitated with his hand on the handle, afraid to push it open, the last time he had been in this room was when Sakura was helping him adjust to his blind state, before he had discovered the use of chakra as a replacement for sight, he knew he didn't want to go in, but... Pushing the door open, he could tell the room was dark; there was something deeply unsettling about Sakura sitting alone at dark room, this room of all places—the room where his parents had died.

She was sitting on the floorboards, positioned in a spot where he himself had sat as a child staring for endless hours at the middle of the room. She said nothing to him when he entered the room, not even glancing at him when he crossed the threshold. She did not sound like she was crying though; she was just sitting dolefully in the dark. Sasuke let out an uncharacteristic sigh.

"What are you doing in here, Sakura?" he asked her, worry suddenly plaguing him, though it did not show in his voice; Sakura was cradling in her hands the kunai that was engraved with his father's name.

"I'm just trying to put things into perspective, that's all," she murmured in response.

Perspective? He didn't know what she meant by that, and the kunai resting in her palms was doing nothing to ease his mind.

"If he's missing, there's a chance he's still alive, and if there's a chance, I can still hope," she continued without being asked, "And if I can hope..."

She trailed off. Sasuke simply stood where he was, unsure of what to do.

"I mean, at least there's hope he'll be returning," she said quietly, "If he was confirmed dead, then there is no hope for him to come back. I should be happy to hear that he's only missing, and not dead."

There was a rising pitch in her voice, like she was beginning to grow afraid with each word she spoke.

"I still have hope that he can come back. There are those who can't hope for those that they've lost to come home, so I can't selfishly cry while I have hope, which is so much more than others have," she was saying now, sounding more and more like she was reprimanding herself, rather than talking to him, "I shouldn't cry. I'm not allowed to cry. So why am I crying? I still have hope."

Her fingers closed over the kunai as she began to clutch it, and she slowly collapsed forwards with violent shudders. "Why? Why am I crying? Stop crying, damn it!"

Perspective, the lack of hope for others, the engraved kunai in her hands—she was still thinking of him, even though it was her father was missing and she was the one who deserved sympathy, not him. Sasuke walked over to where she was and sat down next to her; he pulled her into his arms and took the kunai from her hands gently, putting it aside. She had not cut her fingers, which was a good thing, but he still felt better when she did not have a weapon in her hands. It did not appear that she had harmed herself with it, and he didn't think she would have, but her mood made her behaviour questionable, it was better to be safe than sorry.

Sakura did nothing to keep him from taking the kunai and fell into his arms without question, clinging to him in an almost desperate

manner, her crying quiet. In the past, Sasuke had never had to console anyone, and he rubbed her back awkwardly, hoping that it was a comforting gesture. He was really out of his element, and the only thing he could do was go along with the situation and try to better it to the best of his ability—without making things worse.

"I'm so sorry," Sakura murmured after a time, her sobs quieting slightly, "I'm being so selfish right now."

"No, you're not," Sasuke told her firmly, ignoring how their words echoed around the empty room, "You are *not* selfish, Sakura. You are the most self *less* person I know."

"I shouldn't be crying then," she said between broken sobs, her voice muffled in his shirt, "Here I am, sitting here, thinking of what a horrible daughter I've been while there still may be a chance that I can fix that."

The words caught him by surprise; he didn't think that Sakura had been a horrible daughter to either of her parents. He wasn't sure how to respond to that, because he guessed he wasn't in any position to say, but he definitely knew that she was wrong about one thing.

"No," he told her again, "No. You have a right to cry. Your father is missing, and you are afraid you might never see him again."

"I should be grateful, though" she choked out insistently, "Grateful that he's been reported missing, not dead. Don't you see?"

"Sakura, you should feel what you feel," he said patently, "Don't try to force yourself to feel otherwise. Cry if you're upset."

She did not say anything in response, but cried for a while longer; he held her close to his chest, listening to her quieting lamentation. She grew calmer with each minute, her sobs dying down to quiet whimpering, and then to silent tears, but despite that, her chakra flickered more miserably with each passing second. Soon the room was completely silent save for Sakura's ragged breathing.

"But do you, Sasuke?" she asked when her sobs had diminished, "Do you cry when you're upset?"

"I've cried all my tears for my own miseries," he told her quietly, "I've moved on."

She shuffled slightly so that she was able to look up at his face. He had cut off his senses while she cried, and now, as he looked at her, the light from the open door illuminating her face, all he could see was a pale splash in the darkness where her face was supposed to be. But when he closed his eyes and activated his senses, the image was so sharp in his mind that he could sense each particle of water that hung on her eyelashes. She turned her head away from him and looked to the floor ahead of them. He could not see the stains of blood, for they were in the wood, not on it, but he knew they were there.

"I don't think you have," she said finally, her voice somber, but unwavering this time, "there are still so many sorrows locked up in side."

"Sakura, this isn't about me," he told her, rubbing her back again.

"No. I've burdened you with my sorrows, please...please, give me some of yours," she begged, her grasp tightening on him slightly.

"You're not going to feel any better by exchanging one burden for another," he told her, frowning at her. He hadn't expected her to turn everything around and suddenly it was his own sorrows that needed to be voiced.

"Maybe not," she said seriously, her voice filled with melancholy, "But then we could shoulder both burdens together, and it won't hurt as much for either of us. It's not about you, it's not about me—it's about us. It won't be your burden, and it won't be mine, it'll be both."

"Sakura..." he spoke her name with a slight frustration at her reasoning, she was confusing him, and that rarely ever happened.

He didn't like it.

"If you won't tell me because you don't want to share the burden, then tell me because then I'll be bettered off in the respect that maybe I can begin to understand you," she said, her voice insistent again.

He was silent for a while, the weight of what she was asking was pushing down on his mind. He cut the chakra from his senses once more and opened his eyes, the shades of grey splashed haphazardly around the room returning as he did so. When he came into this room and found her lying on the floor, this was the last thing that he had expected would happen.

"...Please, Sasuke," she whispered, "Tell me about your sorrows."

The hand that had been rubbing her back had stopped to rest on her shoulder. His heart began to pound in his chest—not faster, but louder, loud enough that he thought he could hear it outside his own head. He ran his hand down the length of Sakura's arm until he covered the back of her hand with his own; she turned her hand over so that her palm was against his, lacing her fingers with his. Still unsure if this was the right thing to do, he began.

"While everyone was caught up in their childish dreams, I was caught in reality, and it was strangling me. Everyone made their boasts of how they were going to be 'the best' or 'the greatest'—such innocent dreams, ones that I was deprived of at an early age. While everyone else dreamed such pure goals, my goal was to kill. Much more realistic in the shinobi world we live in, but equally as difficult to attain. But it wasn't always so—my dreams hadn't always been of death.

"I lived in this house with my parents, and my older brother Itachi, and while our family wasn't a perfect one, we were a happy one, or so I thought at the time. My parents were kind to each other, and had the occasional argument like all married couples do. They were good to Itachi and me, giving us more than we were grateful for. But we

had our share of problems within our own household. I always felt that I had to do as well as Itachi in everything, meeting the standards he set ahead of me. He could use the Sharingan at seven; he graduated from the Academy at age eight; he became an ANBU at age twelve. My father was proud of his son, while I felt incompetent and overshadowed. But I strove daily so that maybe one day I would be able to catch my father's attention, and maybe gain some praise that was my own—praise that did not compare me to Itachi. The kunai that you possessed, it is tradition to give it when an Uchiha comes of age, and I longed for the day that my father would realize that I had grown up; I wanted him to look at me with proud eyes when he realized his son had become a man. I looked up to my father, you see, I admired him as any boy admires his father. Did you know that my dream was to become the Captain of the Konoha Military Police Force, just as my father had been?"

Sakura shook her head slightly, and he was reminded she was there. So long ago it had been his dream to be the captain of the military police... That dream seemed so far and distant now, that it was almost like he had imagined that life.

"I was forced to grow up very quickly in a short period of time. The night the clan was killed was the day I died—no, I suppose it was the day that I wished I could have died. To be the single life walking through a bloodied massacre; to remember it causes the feeling to wash over me again. Rising panic, bone-chilling fear, terror, horror. It's so surreal, yet right in front of your eyes and it won't go away. I can never forget that day—there isn't one that passes in which I don't think about that night. Walking through the silent streets, streets that had life bustling through them mere hours previously, it's haunting. The worst part is finding people you knew, people you cared about. My very own aunt and uncle were some of the first people I found that night. You often puzzled over why I never liked sweet things... My aunt and uncle owned a small sweets shop, and sometimes would give me a candy as I ran off to school. I can't look at a piece of candy without being reminded of them."

His voice died for a moment, as he was reminded of his aunt and uncle. They had been dead for so long, so why did it hurt as if they had died only recently? His aunt's kindly face and his uncle's amused and wise chuckle, their faces had never faded from his memory—he could remember them distinctly. He wondered what things would have been like if they had still been alive; would he have still stopped at their shop every day after lessons at the Academy? After he graduated, would he stop by every time he returned home from a mission? Would he have brought his own children there for sweets when he was married and they were old? The thoughts of what could have been hurt just as much as what was. He would never be able to erase from his mind the image of their bodies when he came home to that isolated street. And he doubted if he'd ever be able to eat anything sweet without thinking of them.

"When you are so utterly alone, you instantly sense the flicker of another's life. You look over your shoulder more than necessary, afraid for your own life, even if you feel like you should lie dead among the rest. Perhaps that was what drew me towards my own home amid everything around me, or maybe it was the foolish hope that maybe my family was okay. I ran home screaming for my parents, hoping that they would somehow be alive...but inside me I already knew it was too late.

"The image of my parent's bodies, lying crumpled in this very room, is forever imprinted on my mind. And I don't know which was worse: their bodies lying on the floor before me, the blood still running warm, or the white outlines drawn on the wood, the blood long dry. I knelt for hours before those marks, detached thoughts drifting across my ever-darkening mind, the only things standing out clearly were the white-chalk lines. The bodies were gone; nothing emphasized to me more that they were gone than their missing bodies and those deathly white markings on the floor. I would never get to hear praise from my father, no matter how hard I trained. I would never hear my mother sing for me again, even if I called out for her in the night.

"People seem to have this mentality that when everyone was killed, I was fortunate—fortunate to be absent when the horror took place; that I was spared witnessing the massacre, and only arrived after it was over. It's a misconception—an untrue belief. Even though I was not there, I was unfortunate enough to meet my brother that night. The clan's most powerful and dangerous doujutsu: the Mangekyou Sharingan—its horrors can only be comprehended by those who have fallen to it. I never told anyone what Itachi did to me that night..." Sasuke faltered in his speech, the words getting caught in this throat.

There were few people who knew what actually happened, and he had never told anyone the story of what had happened to him when he had been trapped. He recomposed himself, knowing he should speak about this, now that he had started he knew he had to finish to the end, and this tale of his own experienced tragedy would only leave his mouth to be received by someone he trusted. The only person he trusted was Sakura. He inwardly gave a cynical smirk. Trust... before he had started trusting her, when had been the last time he had truly trusted someone?

"Through the Mangekyou Sharingan, Itachi trapped me a genjutsu world called Tsukuyomi, where time passes as the user wishes. A second could pass in the real world as years fly by in your mind. I was at my brother's disposal, and for a week's worth of time I was forced to watch helplessly as my brother slaughtered each member of the clan over and over and over... And when I was finally freed from that world to find that no time had passed, my brother's final edict was to hate him, to despise him, and live in the most despicable way so that maybe, one day, I would be able to possess the skill to kill him. I never forgot those words—they became my new dream."

At this, Sakura's grasp tightened on him considerably. He did not want to activate his senses, he did not want to see the look of horror that would be painted on her face. She finally knew the key piece in

his past, the final part that made the tragedy that much worse for him. She was the only one who knew.

"Sasuke...I...I didn't know," she whispered, and he felt a new wetness on his shirt, "I..."

He shook his head at her, and she fell silent again, but he could feel her crying again, though she made no further noise. She did not interrupt him again afterwards. It was a moment before he resumed his tale, the words spilling out again, like they were trying to escape him rather than being spoken at his bidding.

"The funeral that was held after the incident was not exactly a somber occasion; it was more of a curiosity for people who had heard about the event. At a normal funeral, one person dies and the family bids them goodbye; but at this funeral, my clan—my family, had died, and I was the only one to bid them goodbye. I wasn't ready to let them go, but there was nothing I could do. I could only listen as the names were read off one at a time and then blow away in the wind, to be forgotten by all, except me.

"I had always been a normal person, generally ignored when I ran around town with my friends, but now there was no place I could go without people staring at me. It was like the emblem of the Uchiha Clan had become a symbol for tragedy, and wherever I went it was as if I had been branded with the word 'unfortunate'. Eyes were constantly on me, whispers following me in my wake, continuously reminding me of my cruel fate; not that I could ignore it anyways, as the emptiness of the neighbourhood refused to let me put it from my mind.

"Even at school I found little peace; there were few people aware of what happened to me—most were too young to care. But those who had heard would point and whisper about me. I was 'the last Uchiha' and was treated with kind of awe and marvel. A spectacle to be looked at—not a person.

"I distanced myself from my friends, and the rest of the class for that matter. Before, I had never minded the girls who would come and talk to me, giggling and blushing—I was always ready to greet anyone with a smile and speak with them as an equal—but now anyone who tried to talk to me got pushed away. For some reason, which to this day I'll never understand, my cold attitude somehow attracted more girls towards me, instead of shaking them off. I once didn't mind chatting with a girl who would shyly approach me, but after what happened, I just found it annoying.

"I strove doubly as hard after I had been left alive among the dead, my brooding thoughts revolving around my brother, on how to kill him, to make him suffer. My life was focused on my skill, my goal, and on my absolute loneliness. My dreams were plagued by the slaughters playing in my head; my brother's Mangekyou Sharingan having provided me with the twisted images. Screams, blood, pain, fear, chaos—things that I had seen before, except now put on entirely new perspective, on a much greater scale. I had hear people scream, but not in the throes of death. I had seen blood on my scraped knee, but not spilling from the insides of an innocent person. I had felt afraid, but not fear in the midst of panic. I had seen confusion, but never in the form of full-blown hell-bearing chaos. I experienced each sense anew as I was shown them through the Tsukuyomi—I was eight years old."

Again Sakura's grip grew tight on him, but she did not speak—but she didn't need to speak in order for him to know what was going through her mind. He chose to continue rather than to think about it.

"Time faded away the shock of the tragedy, burying it deeply inside me, and I began to learn how to cope. But I wasn't the same anymore, how could I have been? I was a changed person. I grew accustomed to walking home and being greeted by silence. Nightmares were a normality and could sometimes be escaped through overly-strenuous training. But a day wouldn't go by that I wouldn't think about that tragic day, of the people I had loved and lost.

"As years passed, people stopped staring and whispering, girls continued to flock, and life resumed for everyone...except me. I still didn't talk to people, but I didn't mind as much when people ventured to talk to me, as long as they didn't hang around too long—and with my cool demeanor, they never did.

"The day I graduated from the Academy was a celebratory event for nearly everyone present. Naruto wasn't the only one who had sat alone that day while everyone had parents to congratulate them on passing. I had sat on the hill above the Academy and watched with a heavy heart, my new forehead protector tied firmly around my head; the day I had been enrolled into the Academy that I was eagerly awaiting graduation, but I had never imagined that I would be spending it on my own. I was not so enthused about graduation as everyone else was, it only reminded me of what I no longer had.

"Becoming a member of Team Seven helped me realize the importance of others again—Kakashi's lesson in teamwork taught me that, and I began to let myself befriend others again. Naruto became my best friend, while you became someone who I could rely on to always be present, no matter the circumstances. I came to seep into the present, enjoying my friends even if I never showed how much they meant to me. I had people to care about, and my loneliness was dispelled for a time. But even if life in the present was brought to my attention, I had no true future. My future resided in overcoming the past, and to overcome the past, my brother could no longer continue to walk on this earth.

"Eventually because of the curse mark, my own inability to accept Naruto's accelerating strength, and my desire for power lured me away from this place, braving loneliness once more in order to achieve my goal. It was a foolish mistake and it was so clear to everyone around me, but I was completely blind to it.

"After leaving Konoha, I came to feel as alone as I had when my clan had been murdered. Though there was company aplenty in Otogakure, and I was practically worshipped for being Orochimaru's next vessel, I found no satisfaction in any of it. I attempted to console

myself by telling myself that it was all for Itachi's eventual death—it would be worth it in the end. I could barely convince myself of this lie, let alone admit that I had made a mistake.

"I trained daily with Orochimaru, trying to find ways to forget my life in Konoha. I could no longer go back there, I told myself continuously, so there was no point in keeping the memories. But little things would keep reminding me of my home, the song, *Sakura*, that I learned in my first few months, or the scent of ramen as I walked by the mess hall—sometimes the reminders would make me so angry that nobody dared speak to me. I felt so trapped in the Sound Village, because power came so easily to me with my Sharingan, yet I felt like something was missing, like I wasn't gaining strength at all. Perhaps it was my loneliness, or perhaps it was the constant awareness of my limited time—I had no interest in becoming Orochimaru's next vessel, and when I could, I plotted behind his back.

"But despite everything I had learned, all the techniques that I now possess, it soon became painfully obvious to me that I was missing the key in to defeating him. And as the clock ticked by, I became more and more anxious. Orochimaru had no intention of killing Itachi for me, even if I made it my last request. And it was the last day, the final limit of my time, as I knew that they were coming for me, that I sought for anything that could get me out of it, anything that could prevent my dreams from being disregarded. I struggled with alternatives to get out of being a container for that bastard's tainted soul, and I could only think of one way. I knew I could have died for it, but I would rather risk it than walk willingly to a definite end. So I did the only thing that I could think to do: I blinded myself."

It was at this point that Sakura finally was unable to maintain her silence, the gasp of shock penetrated the thick atmosphere sharply. He still refused to activate his senses but stared blankly forwards, the shades of grey the only things he could see at that moment. He did not try to stop Sakura from speaking, because he knew that he

had kept it so long from her, and now that she finally knew, she had a right to speak.

"You took your own sight?" she breathed, her voice shaking, growing more unstable as she continued, "Oh, Sasuke, I'm so sorry! All this time... All this time I thought that Orochimaru had been the one who took your sight, and all this time it was you. If I had known... why didn't you tell me?"

He turned his head to the pale splotch that was her face, "Because I knew that you would have shown me more sympathy than you already did, because I knew that you would care so much more and try and comfort me. I didn't want you to, because when I took my own sight, I knew it was my fault that it came to that. I didn't need your sympathy, I deserved scorn; the loss of my sight is my punishment for my foolishness."

"Why do you always have to think that way?" she said, her voice catching in a sob, "What good does it do to punish yourself? That's so wrong, Sasuke!"

"Then what is it that you're doing to yourself by allowing me to tell you about what I have suffered?" he asked her evenly in return, turning his head back towards her "It's no different, Sakura."

There was a black 'o' where her mouth hung open to put forth an argument she did not possess. After a moment, she shut her mouth and turned away from him, though he could barely see the gesture. He was right and she knew it. There was a beat of silence.

"It's ironic how things turn out..." he said finally, brushing the stillness aside, "When I had my vision, I was blind. And it's only now that I've lost my sight that I can clearly see the things that should have been important to me."

Sakura turned her head to look at him and then buried her face in his chest. "Thank you for telling me...everything," she said, her voice muffled.

He didn't know when it had happened, but his hand had become separated from hers, and now it rested on her shoulder, where he was twisting the ends of her silky pink locks through his fingertips. Closing his eyes he activated his senses once more, picking up on every detail, the room didn't seem so dark when he was seeing the layout created by the information he received and his imagination.

"Come, Sakura," he told her, dropping his hand from her shoulder; she loosened her grasp and looked up at him, her expression confused, "We can't stay in here."

She nodded, but didn't really seem to register what he had said. It wasn't until he started to stand up that she let her arms fall away and turn her head towards the vast space of the room. She made no move to indicate that she was going to get up as well, she just merely sat there; her chakra signature had a strange empty feeling to it.

"You go ahead, I'll just be here for a little bit longer..." she told him when he didn't leave.

His mouth became a hard line as he realized that Sakura was not going to move. He didn't know what he had hoped to achieve by telling her his story—he himself was feeling weighed down by his memories now that he had recalled them—but he had at least hoped that he could get her out of this room; he knew for a fact that it couldn't be good for her mental state to sit like this in the room where his parents had died. Standing there for a little bit longer, he pondered what to do; he really wasn't good at this sort of thing, and even though he had done what she asked, he hadn't accomplished anything. There was only one thing he could think of doing, and now that he thought of it, he should have done it to begin with.

He picked the engraved kunai up off the floor, not entirely sure that he trusted Sakura with it, and after examining it mournfully with his senses, he put it in his kunai pouch for temporary storage. He looked at her once again, and knew that no matter what he said or did, she would not come out.

"I'll wait for you inside," he told her, getting only a nod in response. But when he left, he only returned to the house to grab his shoes. Sakura wouldn't move of her own accord, that much was obvious, he knew she'd be there when he came back, and probably wouldn't realize he was gone. Where he was going was important—he was going to get help from the only person he knew who could do anything. Haruno Kanaye.

Sasuke stood awkwardly on the front doorstep of Sakura's house, not that there was anything particularly awkward about standing on Sakura's front doorstep, it's just that he normally wasn't someone who sought people out for help. Firstly, he hardly ever asked for help, and secondly, normally people came and sought *him* out if they needed help; for the second time that day, he was doing something that he really didn't know how to deal with. So much for his taking a step back in his relationship with Sakura—he wasn't going to even try to bother with that. Things were going to get complicated, he could foresee that very clearly, and he knew that he was going to get closer to Sakura if anything. He'd just have to protect everyone by building his own strength, because there was no way that he was going to try and push Sakura away when she was like this.

Clenching his jaw, he reminded himself why he was here, and raising his hand he knocked on the door. He knew that Kanaye was home, he just hoped that it was him rather than Sakura's mother that answered the door; he didn't know what he'd do if it was her mother, because he didn't know how she'd react if she was told her daughter was sitting in a dark room by herself and refusing to come out. Thankfully though, Haruno Kanaye's chakra signature began to make its way to the door, and a few seconds later it opened to reveal the ninja in question.

For the first time since Sasuke had developed the chakra sense with Neji's assistance, Sasuke was now able to see what Kanaye looked like for the first time, and it was quite different from what he had imagined. Haruno Kanaye had long hair, contrary to what Sasuke

had imagined, and a very soft-built face; he was lean and looked like he would be someone to rely on speed in a fight, rather than strength, much like Sasuke did. Additionally, he had always thought Kanaye to be around the same height as he had been, only to find him a good six inches taller than himself.

Surprised passed over the face of the man in the door when he saw who was standing on the doorstep, but it did not mask the very glum look that he himself had been wearing. Sasuke was glad to note, though, that Kanaye's chakra signature wasn't nearly as badly depressed as Sakura's was.

"Hello, Emo Prince," Kanaye said with astonishment mixed with weariness, "What are you doing here?"

"It's Sakura," Sasuke replied, and Kanaye's eyebrows went up, hiding them beneath the hair that fell over his forehead.

He looked around, seeming to notice that Sakura wasn't with him, "Where is she?"

"She's back at the house," Sasuke stated in response.

"What's wrong?"

"She's sitting on the floor of the room where my parents were killed, in the dark, because she's trying to put things into 'perspective'," Sasuke replied impatiently, he didn't want to stand around and discuss what was wrong, he wanted something done about it, "She won't come out."

Kanaye uttered a curse under his breath and turned around and yelled in the open door. "Mom, I'm going to go check on Sakura!" when there was a muffled okay in response, he turned back to Sasuke and said: "Let's go."

Sasuke nodded, and before he could move, Kanaye had leapt up onto the roof of his own house; Sasuke hadn't thought they would

take that route, but if Sakura's brother felt it was necessary, he wasn't complaining. He landed next to Kanaye only long enough for his feet to touch the tiles before they leap to the next building, followed shortly by another.

"When you found her, what did you do?" Kanaye asked as they moved, "Did you talk to her? Did you leave her there? What?"

"I asked her what she was doing in that room," Sasuke replied, paying careful attention to his footing while he moved, "I think she guessed the room's significance before, but she knows now for sure. She thinks that she shouldn't be upset about what happened to your father because there is still the possibility that he's still alive."

"What's that got to do with that room?" Kanaye asked, a frown on his face.

"When she said she wanted to put things in perspective, I believe she was trying to compare how I had no parents and your father was merely missing," Sasuke replied stiffly, "She thinks that crying because your father is missing is being selfish."

"What did you say to her when she told you this?"

"I told her that she was the most selfless person I knew and she should cry when she was upset," Sasuke replied, not sure what Kanaye was trying to gain by having these questions answered.

"You told her that she was being ridiculous—except much more delicately," Kanaye confirmed, just before leaping down into the street that ran in front of the manor, "You did put it delicately, right?"

Sasuke landed firmly next to him, "More or less."

"What happened after that?" Kanaye said breaking out into a run that Sasuke found rather slow in comparison to his own speeds.

"For some reason she wanted to find out what happened to my clan," Sasuke replied with a frown, that part he still couldn't understand, "I didn't want to tell her, but she said that she burdened me with some of her sorrows so she wanted to shoulder some of mine. She insisted that she would feel a little bit better if she felt she could understand me."

"But you didn't tell her, did you?" Kanaye asked sounding alarmed, eying the Uchiha beside him.

"I did."

Sasuke sensed the hand behind him and ducked just as it tried to make contact with the back of his head; it hadn't been a genjutsu—there was no chakra in the hand—but he was more confused about why Kanaye had tried to attack him.

"Why did you try to do that?" he snapped irritably at Sakura's brother, and Kanaye stopped dead in his tracks, looking annoyed.

"Are you stupid or something? You shouldn't have told Sakura about what happened to your clan," Kanaye reprimanded him, crossing his arms, "It's only given her more depressing things to think about."

"She said she would feel better if I told her!" Sasuke argued back, disgruntled, "Was there something I was supposed to do?"

"Not tell her?" Kanaye suggested with a sigh, "When Sakura's upset, she's got this method of making herself feel better by making herself feel worse. You shouldn't have told her, because now she has two things to think about that are depressing."

Sasuke turned his head away; how was he supposed to know what to do? He had never had to comfort anyone before in his life, so how was he supposed to know that Sakura would have a twisted method like that up her sleeve? He found her so difficult to understand, even though there was nothing deceptive about her—everything he saw

was what she was. So why couldn't he understand what was put so plainly before him?

"Listen, I'm glad that you came and got me," Kanaye said after a moment's pause, "I'll go talk to her and get her out of that room. We should go."

Sasuke nodded and followed Sakura's brother when he continued down the street. At least he had done something right.

As Sasuke had suspected she wouldn't, Sakura hadn't moved at all from her position in the room, and after taking Kanaye to the door, he was told to go wait somewhere until he was done talking with Sakura. Even though Sasuke hated being ordered around, he went to the kitchen without complaint and put on a pot of tea. Waiting patiently at the kitchen table he ignored the signatures of the Haruno siblings as he withdrew into his own consciousness.

Thoughts chased each other inside his head as one thing seemed to lead to another in his mind; maybe Kanaye was right in that he shouldn't have told Sakura what it was like for him to lose the clan, but he was glad that he had told her; at least one person he knew he could trust that knew what he had been through. Perhaps he should have told her under better circumstances, but it was too late to do anything now. He didn't know when he had planned on telling her that he had taken his own sight, but he hadn't expected to do it so soon.

And what would he do after this? What would he do until Sakura got over her father's absence or until his unlikely return? He hoped that Kanaye would have some answers for him, because he did not know what to do in the least. He could do his best to try and comfort and support Sakura, but he had done it wrong the first time this morning, how could he be sure in himself not to make mistakes again? He didn't like having to be told what to do, but he felt helpless otherwise, he had no choice this time.

About half an hour later, Sasuke felt Kanaye's presence drift towards him, and soon the said jounin entered the kitchen. There was one thing amiss with this, and that was the fact that Sakura had been left behind in the room. Sasuke turned his head towards Kanaye pointedly, attempting to give him the most disapproving look he could muster.

"She still in there," it wasn't a question.

"I know, but she'll be out," Kanaye said, sitting down opposite the Uchiha, and after a moment, took an apple from a fruit bowl Sakura had put out yesterday.

"How do you know that?" Sasuke asked, as far as he could tell, Sakura's brother had done no more than he had. Sakura was still in that ill-fated room, which is what he had brought Kanaye over to deal with.

"I offered her a choice," Kanaye replied, taking a small bite out of the apple, "She can come out in fifteen minutes, or I'd make her move back home. And don't say anything, I know what you're thinking; the threat of having to leave is a bargaining chip that is worth more than you think."

"She feels obligated to stay because she feels that there is still more she can do for me," Sasuke said with understanding, he knew what Kanaye meant; Sakura would not want to leave until he dismissed her, when her work was done.

Kanaye shook his head at him, taking another bite of the apple, "No. You underestimate the value of your own existence, Emo Prince. Just being here with you is enough to drive her to leave that room. She loves you, you know."

"I know," Sasuke replied, though the reason Kanaye had given had thrown him off his usual way of thinking. He supposed that he shouldn't have been surprised, but again Sakura had managed to do exactly that—once again.

"Believe it or not, this actually isn't all that bad in comparison to how bad it got while you were gone," Kanaye stated casually, turning the apple over in his hand contemplatively, "Don't worry too much, she'll be okay."

Sasuke felt his eyebrows descend sharply as a unconvinced frown etched itself on his face, "I don't believe that; I can't believe that."

"Why?"

"When I found her this morning, she had a kunai in her hand," Sasuke said firmly. This statement was meant to prove that Kanaye was wrong, emphasize that he had missed something, that what he had said about Sakura being alright, was completely inaccurate. Much to Sasuke's surprise Kanaye remained calm.

"When my parents were faced with a very depressed daughter, they didn't know what to do. The Haruno clan has shown that they are quite different from other people in the way that they think, perhaps you have noticed at times that Sakura seems to take on a different persona when she's emotionally sensitive—particularly when she's angry," Kanaye began, putting the arm with the apple down on the table.

Sasuke nodded, recalling the number of times that he had seen this persona appear, the one he had called Demoness Sakura.

"Even though it varies in degree to each person, each clan member is susceptible to having emotional outbursts. It doesn't always happen in people, normally they need a sort of push to get them started, and as far as life went, everything was okay for Sakura and I; so my parents weren't particularly worried about something pushing us off the edge. That's why when Sakura was thrown into depression, they were completely unprepared," Kanaye stated solemnly, his voice heavy, "I told you how she behaved at home, though outside the house she was very good at pretending that she was fine. Actually I'm surprised she broke down in front of you, I

would have thought that out of all people she would have tried to keep a brave face in front of you."

"She tried, but I knew something was wrong," Sasuke replied evenly, trying to keep his own worries out of the conversation, he couldn't cloud his thoughts with emotion or he might miss something important that Kanaye might say, "She doesn't know, but something that she taught me allows me to gain a general scope on people's emotions."

"I see, so you picked up that something was wrong," Kanaye replied with realization, "Well, at least she won't be able to fool you, and I'm relieved by that, actually. But when Sakura was a mess at home, my parents were seriously afraid that she might try to harm herself or even go as far as commit suicide. They were unsure whether they should allow her to stay a kunoichi because she would have such easy access to weapons and poisons, so they tried suggesting to her that maybe she should take a break from being a ninja. It was the wrong thing to suggest to her."

"What happened?" Sasuke asked, for the tone in Kanaye's voice sounded like he was still blown away by the outcome.

"Well, the whole reason she became a kunoichi was for you, and continuing to be a kunoichi was the only way to save you—so that in itself was a mistake to suggest. But she knew that wasn't why they had suggested it, she saw right through them. I don't think I've ever heard her angrier before in her life; she told my parents that they were stupid for believing that she would hurt herself, or try and kill herself. She demanded them to give her an example of what death would accomplish for her, she said that in hurting herself she'd be hindering herself in her studies; she said that committing suicide would not save you, and she would only feel guilty in the afterlife for running, hurting everyone who cared about her and leaving you to your fate," Kanaye recounted and Sasuke noted the very careworn expression he wore, "So I wouldn't worry too much about Sakura trying to hurt herself to relieve emotional pain, it's against her principles for one thing. And suicide is the last thing on her mind right

now—she wouldn't throw her life away now that you're back. The kunai she had probably was part of her way of putting things into perspective, a symbol of sorts to her."

Sasuke was silent; it would make sense if she considered the kunai a symbol. She hadn't known before what it meant, but she had known it was important to him, and the very fact that it had his father's name on it would indicate to her that it had something to do with his relationship with his parents. It was a very distorted way of thinking, but Sasuke supposed that to someone as emotionally distraught as Sakura, it made some sense.

"Though my parents tried to get her to, she wouldn't go on antidepressants to attempt to cure what was wrong with her," Kanaye said with a final air, "Sometimes they don't work on the Haruno clan because often it's this alternate persona, or secondary thought train, that allows people to dwell too much on what is upsetting them, not a chemical imbalance in their brains. But after the worst of it was over, and Sakura began to find purpose to her life again, things cleared up on their own. But this situation is different, because this time there is nothing she can do."

"What should I do?" Sasuke asked, "I think you can agree that she can't stay like this."

"No, I concur," Kanaye agreed with a nod, "...I think she'd be willing to try going on antidepressants this time...if you were the one to suggest it. Take her to see Tsunade-sama about it if she seems a little bit willing. Also try and keep her distracted, give her something to do—don't allow her to hang around here too much and think about what happened to your family. Make her spend some time with her friends too; don't get me wrong, Emo Prince, I've really come to respect you, especially because of what you've done today—sans the telling her about your clan—but I don't think that Sakura should spend all her time with you."

Sasuke nodded in understanding; he wasn't offended in the least, he knew what Kanaye meant when he said that he didn't want Sakura

to spend as much time with him as she had, she needed to have more things to catch her attention.

Kanaye finished off the apple he had been nibbling on and after he had set the core down, he looked at a watch on his wrist. Sasuke hadn't really been paying attention to Sakura's chakra signature while Kanaye had talked to him, but now he drew awareness to it and realized that she had moved from the room and was going in through the back door.

"She's coming," Sasuke told Kanaye, who was oblivious to her movement.

Turning his head, the said jounin called back into the hall, "Sakura?"

"I'm here," came her quiet voice and a few moments later she entered the kitchen, "I'm okay now."

Sasuke knew very well that she wasn't, but Kanaye put on a stern tone and replied: "You'd better be. I guess you can stay, seeing as you did come out thirty seconds before time was up. And if I hear anything more about you trying to put things in perspective, then you're coming straight home."

A puzzled expression was forbidden to show on Sasuke's face though it was very close to displaying itself; after a moment though, he figured out that Kanaye was using his position as Sakura's older brother to make sure that she didn't do anything further. Sakura seemed to take it as she just merely gave a nod. It really was a unique relationship that those two had, Sasuke observed with high regard.

Kanaye got up from where he sat, moving to give his sister a hug. When he pulled away, he ruffled her hair slightly, "If you need anything, Mom will be at home, and I'll be around till the end of the month."

Sakura just nodded mutely and said nothing in response.

"Take care of yourself."

That last statement that Kanaye spoke to Sakura was filled with such concern, such earnestness, that Sasuke felt himself take the words to heart. He almost heard another message laced in with it, one that was directed at him, a request—a request for Sasuke to watch over his sister, to watch over Sakura.

Evening had come once again, and Sakura was growing anxious. She didn't know why, but for as long as she could remember, no matter what face she wore during the day, at night, it seemed to slip off and she could not manage to keep it on. It was night now, and was brushing her teeth in front of the bathroom mirror, eying her haunted reflection.

She looked at her reflection with bitterness; she didn't look as horrible as she had seen herself before, when she had been hit with depression the first time. But she had a feeling that Sasuke didn't know that, she hadn't told him about her previous depression. What must he think of how she was now? She didn't want to tell him about her depression from a few years previous, she didn't want him to know about it. The reason behind that was unknown to her, she didn't know if he would even care about her depression before.

He cared now though, she thought to herself, he cared enough to tell her his deepest hurt—to tell her about the most horrible experience in his life. He had brought Kanaye out of concern for her, and a small sad smile pulled at the corner of her lips. How awkward she must have made him feel, acting like this without warning; she knew that Sasuke wasn't exactly practiced in dealing with these types of situations. But she was glad he had brought Kanaye, the two of them together had allowed her to get a hold of herself, or at least anchor a part of her back in this world.

Kanaye had been right—out of all the things he had spoken to her about, he had been right about all of them. There was nothing she could do to help their father, only hope, and maybe not even then.

He had told her to focus on what to do now, not over what was—what were the things she needed to accomplish. Who needed her now? She couldn't lament over someone she couldn't help and neglect what she needed to do. There was wisdom to those words, but he hadn't told her to forget either. Kanaye said that she could hurt too, just as long as it didn't get in the way—it wasn't what their father would have wanted.

So that's what she had done: she looked at the things she needed to get accomplished, and she would work on those. Naruto's birthday still had to be celebrated, she needed to restore Sasuke's sight, and the Chuunin Exams were a couple months away, they needed to prepare for those. There was a medic's graduation ceremony she had to attend, and who knew what would come up along the way. So that day she had spent planning things to do for Naruto's birthday, sat Sasuke through another healing session and finished up the chores. The hurt had been set aside for a while, and ignored.

But now that she had nothing left to do, nothing but sleep and a mind empty of tasks, she could feel the hurt coming back to her. And she was afraid to let it grasp her again; only when she looked back on her miseries could she say that she hated being miserable, but when she was as upset as she was now, there was no room to feel angry about being miserable. It was horrible.

She spat into the sink and rinsed her mouth. Balling up her dirty clothing, she walked towards the bedroom, where Sasuke was undoubtedly trying to sleep, if he wasn't already asleep. He was already lying in bed when she entered the room, and as quietly as she could, she put her dirty laundry in a pile that would start the pile of dirty clothes for next week's washing. Straightening up, she paused where she stood, staring at her empty futon, grief starting to creep up spitefully on her. She didn't want to be alone, she didn't want to have to let her mind torment her while she was alone.

She cast a glance at Sasuke, his form still in his bed. What about last night? He hadn't left her alone then; she hadn't wanted to burden him with her sorrows, but it was too late now, wasn't it? If she...if she

were to... Would he accept her again if she was the one to come to him? She just wanted to be close to someone at that moment, to remind herself she wasn't alone in this world. She had never felt completely and utterly alone—she could not begin to imagine it until she had experienced it as Sasuke had. The small pit of loneliness she felt now, was enough to make it hurt when she thought of the loneliness he must have felt.

Walking quietly over to the bed, she paused when Sasuke rolled over to face her. She did her best to hide the pained expression on her face, but it was too late at night now, and her protective mask had broken. Hesitantly she grasped the edge of the blankets and pulled them back far enough to allow herself to fit between them; nervously she slid under the covers, afraid how Sasuke would react, but he only shuffled over to make room for her. She was relieved, but she didn't want to push it, being there was enough to get her by through the night, and even though it was a tight fit in the twin bed, barely enough room for the two of them, she tried to give him a little space. She was the one invading.

There was a pause, and as she closed her eyes to try and fall asleep, the mattress moved beneath her, and a moment later a hand was laid on her waist, as Sasuke pulled her gently against him. Smothering a sob, she found herself grasping him, holding on as tight as she could without hurting him. Nothing needed to be said between them, for actions speak louder than words, but there was no action that Sakura could think of that would ever truly express her gratitude.

And it was that night that marked the beginning of sleeping in the same bed together over the weeks that followed, each comforted by the mere presence of the other. And even long after Sakura's depression had passed, and even after Sasuke's nightmares became few and far between, it was something that continued on as the months that passed. For even if there was no need to be comforted, they had become so used to being together that if one

was alone without the other, it seemed like something was more that just missing—it was like a part of themselves were gone.

A/N: Another chapter where I had an entire segment written out previously. Glad to have it finally out in a chapter. And just so you know, there is nothing wrong with being on anti-depressants, I support the use of them to make people's lives better. I know a few people who are on them, and I hadn't even realized until I was told. And I also know people who need them, who I wish would use them so I wouldn't have to worry about them running off and doing something horrible like slitting their wrists when they're really down. If you need anti-depressants, use them! People who think they create a sense of false happiness are stupid and uneducated. Listen to your doctors, people—they're the ones who went to med school for who knows how many years! They may not know how you feel, but they know how to fix it, and that's all that matters, really.

On another note, two perfectly respectable readers raised an important issue that I thought significant to share with the rest. They both thought the previous chapter was a little bit on the short side, and thought that instead of putting effort in to retorting to the flammers, that I should focus more on the chapter. Actually, as I have expressed in earlier chapters, I keep way ahead of my postings as far as chapters go, so when it comes to chapter posting day, the length of the chapter has been set in stone for at least a month. I added the flamer-burn about four weeks after the chapter had been finished (btw, it has been removed because some people expressed concerns). So regardless of what I post in author's notes, it doesn't affect the length of the chapter. As I have said, I have the whole story planned out from beginning to end, no matter how long or short the chapters are, I promise you, you will get it all.

Chapter 40

A/N: Chapter Forty.... Wow. That's a lot of chapters... I don't *think* that I'm losing any audience because of length... But I definitely want the story done in the next twenty chapters or so. It shouldn't be too hard. The Mission arc was ten chapters long...I should be able to get the rest done in twenty.... I can just hear some people screaming: "Noooooooooooo!!!! The story is ending soon!" But while I had fun writing this, and had angst writing it...I'll be glad when it's done. Who knows, maybe if I finish early I'll go back to posting weekly. No promises though :p

Hmm...lettuce. Yum. Hurray for dieting. Ugh. Um, that was random. Sorry, I'm in a mellow mood right now, that often spawns randomness. Focus, Sidian. Right, this chapter is Akatsuki-centric. I don't think I've had one of those before... Have fun with it. I'd just like to take the time to emphasize the importance of the goings on of the Akatsuki. Remember way back in chapter six, when in the author's note I told people that I planned on having a fight between Sasuke and Itachi? Yeah, that's coming. The reason we are seeing into Akatsuki's lives is so that we know what's been going down with Itachi, so when the final fight comes, people aren't all: wth? Where did he come from? Additionally, it would weaken the plot considerably, if I threw him in there randomly. Also, why was Sakura's father captured? Because we need character development! We don't need too much Sakura helping Sasuke, we need some Sasuke helping Sakura, regardless of how bad he is at it. Anyone else seeing the "sparks, connecting, laaaa"? Also, the way that Itachi and Konan change once they've met Nariko, and the way Sasuke changes as a result of Sakura's reaction to basically losing her father, also influences behaviour near the end.

Oh, and I DON'T CARE IF KONAN SEEMS TO BE FROM AMEGAKURE IN THE MANGA, WE STILL HAVEN'T SEEN HER FOREHEAD PROTECTOR, AND UNTIL WE DO I'M STILL SAYING SHE'S FROM KUMOGAKURE!!!! (smiles innocently) Though I'm

going to have a hell of a problem trying to fix her history if she does turn out to be from Amegakure... (Shh, nobody heard that.)

Disclaimer: Chapter Forty merits this story another disclaimer renewal, I believe. Much to my extreme disappointment, I do not own Naruto or any of its characters...

...but you can't stop me from adopting Sasuke! (grabs him and runs off)

Chapter Forty: The Beginnings of Realization

Nariko was bored, and while, compared to her previous life in the dark room who knew where, the medical ward was very interesting, she still found herself restless. After she had been brought inside by Flower-chan after the white rain incident, she had not been allowed to leave. She wanted to go outside again and look at the white rain, if it was still there, but Flower-chan had told her that she had almost died because she had stayed out too long. So, she just wouldn't stay out all that long, Nariko thought sulkily, she would just go out for a little while, and this time she would bring her shoes.

She turned her head and watched while one of the medics wandered around aimlessly with a clipboard. Ever since the 'infiltration', everyone except Nariko had been allowed to leave, and she was the only one left. None of the medics had anything to do, and Nariko was just sitting in her corner of the room desolately. She had asked already a number of times if she could leave, but they said that she couldn't leave until the Messenger of God said she could. Nariko knew nothing of any gods, and could only assume that they meant Flower-chan... Konan, the leader had called her... was that her name? She dared not try and call Flower-chan by her real name, unless she got mad.

The medic set his clipboard on a counter and looked at her, Nariko nervously looked away. "I'm going to go out for a bit, you'll be okay

on your own for a bit, right?" he asked her.

She didn't like talking to the medics, the only two people that she ever felt really comfortable talking to was Itachi and Flower-chan, so she just gave a silent nod in reply. Sighing, the man slouched out of the room, leaving Nariko alone. She had seen him leave before, and he was always gone for a really long time. He always seemed to disappear right around the time one of the other nurses left, and Nariko always had the impression that wherever they were, they were together somewhere. She had trouble understanding this, as the medic would often tease, pinch, and poke the nurse, and Nariko knew that she wouldn't want to be around anyone who treated her like that, but the nurse seemed to enjoy it enough. But none of that really interested Nariko, the fact that the medic would be gone—and possibly for a long time—was important.

She wasn't a disobedient girl; she didn't like having any attention paid to her if she could help it, and she definitely didn't want to get in trouble, because they would be angry with her too, but she just really wanted to get out of there. It wasn't like she was going to leave forever, she would come back before the medic did, and nobody would know she had been gone. She was a little bit hungry, that's all, and the food in the infirmary wasn't really that good. Nariko supposed that if she asked someone in the mess hall for food, they would pay little attention to her, and if they asked why she was there, she could tell them that she was allowed outside the medical ward now.

She waited a few minutes to make sure that he wouldn't come back and then she hopped out of the hospital bed and scampered out of the room. It was nice to be out of that dreary room, it had been two days since the 'infiltration' and two days since Flower-chan had told her she had almost frozen to death. This had puzzled Nariko, as she didn't feel like she was going to die; she had only felt sleepy, and she had wanted to sleep. If she were to ever die, Nariko thought to herself, creeping along the hallway, she would want to freeze to death.

It was at this time that Nariko realized that she really didn't know where she was going; she thought she had known where the infirmary was in relation to everywhere else, but she was beginning to realize that the whole area was unfamiliar to her. Nervousness took her then; when she knew where she was, she felt fine about walking around, but when she didn't know where to go, she felt like the chances of running into Hidan, Kakuzu, Zetsu, or any of those other members that she didn't want to run into, increased significantly.

Moving still forwards she automatically started being really quiet, and reminding herself not to be found. The word 'hide' drifted across her mind a lot—not that she wanted to stand still and hide, she wanted to make her wanderings unnoticed by others. The word stealth was not in Nariko's mental vocabulary, but it was the only way to describe how she was acting: stealthy.

Up ahead she heard voices, and after pressing herself against the wall, she wandered forwards. It was unlikely to meet anyone when wandering the halls unless you were near an area where people went a lot—like the mess hall—or unless someone was coming looking for you. Hoping that it was just a busy place, Nariko peeked around the corner and hoped that it wouldn't be someone looking for her.

She had come to a crossroads in the hallway and the voices she had heard were coming from none other than Deidara and Flower-chan. In fact, they were not coming towards her but crossing the path to walk down another one. They had to be talking about something important, why else would their words be so serious and significant-sounding. Nariko couldn't help but smile as she remembered a similar situation not too long ago.

Maybe they were heading to the mess hall, Nariko thought suddenly, there were very few other places that they would go when they had nothing to do. Flower-chan rarely spent any time with anybody unless she had nothing to do. Scampering off quietly, she followed them and started paying attention to what they were saying.

"Is it much farther from here?" Flower-chan asked, looking around as different doors began appearing on the walls that they passed.

"We're pretty close, un," Deidara nodded, indicating down the hallway, "He's not nearly as valuable, so he didn't get a special cell."

"So that's how it is," Flower-chan commented, sounding slightly amused, "I'll need your help again, but this time you get to do something more than fetch paper for me. We're going to do this my way."

"Don't get me too excited, yeah, or we'll have to find an empty cell or I'll have to find myself a cold shower," Deidara said with a strange tone in his voice, but much to Nariko's puzzlement, Flower-chan seemed to ignore this comment.

"Okay, Dei—here's what I need you to do."

They both came to a halt. "What can I do for you?" there was a smirk on his face.

"First, I need you to hit me," she stated evenly, and Nariko managed to suppress her shocked gasp in time. That was the last thing that she had expected Flower-chan to ask.

The only level of shock that Deidara seemed to show was a slight raising of the eyebrows; he gave a nod. Less than a second later, he took a powerful swing to her face, and she staggered slightly. Once she regained her balance she looked at him, her eyes sparkling mischievously.

"That was pathetic," she smirked, holding her face where he had hit her.

"Well, I'd prefer to knock you up in another way," he replied, the corner of his mouth curling.

Flower-chan looked at him with an annoyed expression on her face, which seemed to convey a certain meaning to Deidara. Nariko saw him smile sheepishly at her and shrug. Flower-chan then took off her Akatsuki cloak and dropped in the floor. She was wearing a slit, knee-length skirt and a loose shirt—a low neckline revealed some protective mesh underneath. Deidara smirked.

"Going in so modestly?" he asked teasingly, and Nariko didn't have an idea what he meant.

"I want you to make it look like you apprehended a shinobi, a Jinchuuriki, or something," Flower-chan replied, taking off a ring from her right middle finger, handing it to Deidara, "Not a whore. Don't lose this—and take my forehead protector. Now, grab me and haul me to where he's being detained. I'm your prisoner—you got that? I'm going to struggle, and you're going to be throwing me in there with him."

"It'll look suspicious if it's just me, yeah," Deidara commented, pocketing the strip of cloth that Flower-chan had called her forehead protector; the woman paused to contemplate his statement, "If you're going to be thrown in the holding room, there should be more than one."

"The girl," Flower-chan said after a moment.

"Which girl?"

"The one Itachi left for me to watch, the weasel Jinchuuriki—Nariko," Flower-chan replied, "Go get her from the infirmary."

Deidara gave a nod, and Nariko gasped quietly; both Akatsuki members turned at the sound, causing Nariko to press herself to the wall in fright.

"Come out, Nariko," Flower-chan called, and Nariko didn't move, "Nariko, I know you're there—admittedly you were pretty good at

getting this far without us noticing, but I know that it's you—only you would have any reason to hide. Come out now, we need your help."

She paused hesitantly, but then after a moment, she stepped out into the open, shuffling nervously on the spot. They didn't seem mad that she was following them—again—but she had a feeling that she'd get in trouble later for leaving the infirmary, but in the meantime she walked hesitantly closer to them, standing before them with her gaze focused on a crack in the cement floor.

"Nariko, put on my cloak—Deidara, hit me again, and hit harder this time," she ordered, and Nariko scrambled to comply, donning the cloak over the clothes she had borrowed from Flower-chan months ago. They wouldn't let her wear her own cloak while in the ward and had taken it from her.

Meanwhile Deidara swung his arm again, knocking Flower-chan to the ground, kicking her a couple times in the stomach shortly afterwards. Nariko watched in horror, but Flower-chan merely sat up, smirked, and wiped a trickle of blood from her mouth. Wordlessly she stood and ran her fingers through her hair, knocking the flower accessory aside, giving it a skewed appearance. When her fingers had left her hair, her appearance was rather disheveled; the neat bun was loose and a dark purple bruise was swelling on her left cheekbone.

"Don't look so shocked, Kit, I'll heal it later," she said offhandedly in response to the mortified expression on Nariko's face, "I've suffered worse—all I need for you to do now is to help Deidara take me down to the holding room, where a man is waiting."

"Why do you have to go looking like that?" Nariko muttered nervously, looking up to meet her gaze briefly before looking down at the ground again.

"It doesn't matter, Kit," Flower-chan said gently, "Just grab my arm, while Rembrandt here grabs my other one. I'm going to be

struggling, but it's not for real, okay? Just ignore anything I say and haul me to the room as best as you can with me struggling."

"O-okay," Nariko mumbled and hesitantly grabbed onto Flower-chan's arm, Deidara, who grabbed the other one, smirked broadly.

"Alright, ready?" Flower-chan looked at them both, and only when she had received a confirming nod from each of them, did she open her mouth again.

The sound that emitted from Flower-chan was possibly the most horrible of sounds that Nariko had ever heard previously in her life. A torrent of wailing, screeching, and shrieking echoed all down the hallways, bouncing off the walls and floor, carrying in all directions. It was all the Nariko could do to keep herself from releasing Flower-chan and clapping her hands over her ears to try and stop the banshee-like sounds from entering her ears. The language was almost incoherent, and most of the vocabulary was unfamiliar to Nariko, but with the vehemence at that they were uttered, she wasn't sure if she wanted to know what they meant.

"You bastards! Unhand me!" Flower-chan screamed at the two of them as Deidara started hauling her down the hallway, Nariko tugging her uncertainly, following Deidara's lead, "Get your stupid hands off of me, you bitches! I am not going to go with you! You're making a big mistake if you're think that my village is just going to leave me here!"

The complaints and wailings carried on, many new words coming to Nariko's ears, including 'bitches' and 'bastards'. She didn't want to know what they meant—they were spoken with such hatred that she was afraid to know. Deidara looked grim and angry, and she wondered dimly if he was acting differently than he felt. They were so good at pretending—if she didn't know that they were acting differently than they were thinking, she would have run a long time ago. Perhaps she should try and copy the expression that Deidara was wearing.

A few minutes later after listening to Flower-chan's screeching and trying to keep a strong grasp on her, they arrived in front of a specific metal door with a tiny grill window near the top. Deidara fumbled in his pockets for a minute and then tossed a key at Nariko. It wasn't until recently that Nariko had learned what the metal objects from last time were, and now she knew how a lock and key worked; she proudly marched over to the door to unlock it. She pulled the door open wide and Deidara shoved the struggling Flower-chan inside, who let out a loud protesting scream as he did so.

"Stay in there, you little bitch, and keep quiet, yeah!" Deidara shouted at Flower-chan, who was lying on the ground, glaring up at him. In a defiant gesture, she wiped the trickle of blood that was going down her chin—Nariko wondered if she bit her tongue accidentally while she was screaming, or if she had done it on purpose.

Nariko cast a quick glance at the other occupant of the room, but she only got a quick glance—Flower-chan had gotten to her feet and was rushing to the door. Quickly dashing forwards, Deidara slammed the door, and locked it firmly. There was another shout of frustration, and after a moment there was banging on the door accompanied with some of those words that Nariko didn't know the meaning of.

Smirking, Deidara indicated for Nariko to follow as he led her back down the hallway that they had come from, except now missing one person. Making sure to keep her distance from the man, she walked a few paces behind, her gaze fixed on the floor. Her mind was going over many different things, and she paid little attention to Deidara.

"I'll take you back to the infirmary, yeah, I'm guessing you snuck out," he told her after a moment, and then added hastily, "But you're not in trouble, un. And don't worry about Flower-chan—she's quite the little actress, but she isn't hurt badly."

Nariko nodded mutely. Flower-chan had healed her when she first came back to the fortress with Itachi, and she knew that any hurts she had caused herself could be fixed when Flower-chan wanted

them to be. Her thoughts were elsewhere though; once again she found herself thinking about the prisoner in the cell.

This man was younger than the previous one, but he was still older than Itachi, Flower-chan, or Deidara. He had the same yellowish hair colour that Deidara did, but it was much, much lighter, like...the clouds when the sun shone on it—almost white, but not quite. He also had very strange coloured eyes, they were blue, but bluer than the sky. When they had arrived, he didn't seem alarmed by Flower-chan's behaviour; he was serious and quiet, but his face seemed kindly. She didn't know why, but even though the others seemed to dislike him for one reason or another, Nariko found herself curious about the man.

"Deidara-sama? Can you tell me about *this* man who's in the cell?" she asked, hesitantly. While the mouths on the hands really frightened hers, she still got the feeling that he was a nicer person than some of the other people in Akatsuki, not that she trusted him much.

"Well, that's why we threw Flower-chan in here, un," Deidara replied, "We don't really know who he is, just where he came from."

"What about the other man before? Did you find out what you needed to know from him, Deidara-sama?" Nariko didn't look at him out of nervousness, but she didn't think that it would be bad for her to know.

"No, he got away when the man in the cell and his friends came to rescue him. We didn't find out much about him," Deidara replied, with a shrug, "All I need to know is that he writes good books. That's all that matters to me. Anyways, can you find your way back to the infirmary from here?"

Nariko looked around and recognized that this was the place where she had first started following Deidara and Flower-chan. She was still hungry, but she would return to the infirmary, because the medic would be back soon, and she didn't want to be found missing. She

nodded once and then walked briskly away from Deidara, afraid of being in his presence for too long.

Nariko was bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet, watching Konan intently and making the biggest puppy eyes that the origami kunoichi had ever seen. Rokubi's Jinchuuriki had been hanging around all day, asking every few minutes whether or not Konan thought Itachi would be back soon. As a rule, Akatsuki communicated little when their operatives were out on missions, this ensured that nothing would be intercepted. So, as a result missions were kept to a strict schedule, and there was only a few days lenience for being late, to make a margin for something going wrong on the trip. Unless something went wrong, it was usually safe to assume that those out on the missions would return on the expected day.

That having been said, Itachi's return date was that very day, and Nariko knew very well about it. Itachi, who was reputable for his punctuality, would most likely show up that very day. Konan was beginning to wish, in a half-hearted sort of way, that she hadn't told that girl, therefore she wouldn't be pestered all that much and it would be a delightful surprise for the Weasel's host.

"Please, please, pleeeeeease, Flower-chan?" Nariko begged, using the hated nickname that Deidara had given her, "Can we open the window, please?"

"Why on earth would you want to open the window?" Konan replied with a slight frown, "It's so cold, and after almost freezing to death, I thought you of all people would want to keep it shut."

"Itachi-sama will be returning from that direction though, right?" Nariko persisted, "I can watch form there. I won't freeze if I don't go outside, right?"

"No, but you'll make it cold in here," Konan replied disapprovingly, "It takes a lot of energy to keep the inside of a mountain warm, and you

realize how much money would be wasted if you left the window open? Kakuzu wouldn't be happy about that."

Well, not that they were paying for it anyways...

Nariko made a pouting face and wandered away to sit in the corner of the room. She liked to do that, Konan noticed, it was a psychological security to the Jinchuuriki. Whatever her life had been like before, she hadn't been treated well, that was for sure. But she hadn't gone and sat in the corner because she felt threatened in any way at that moment, it was merely basic, child-like sulking. Her social development had been stunted when her village ostracized her, and even though the host of the Rokubi was probably around the age of sixteen or seventeen, she acted like an eight-year-old.

"Look, how about this: every hour I'll let you open the window to take a small peek?" Konan suggested, not really succumbing to the pouting but more or less just wanting to do something for the girl.

She wasn't going to be alive much longer, and after living such a horrible life, she deserved something to make it a little better. She knew there was no way to save Nariko's life, they needed the Bijuu if Pein was ever going to change the pathetic world they lived in. But she could at least make the last little bit of Nariko's life something other than miserable. She guessed she sort of understood why Itachi was going to teach her to read.

"Really? But what if he comes in between?" the girl asked, getting up slowly, looking happier than she had a few minutes before.

"Then it'll be a pleasant surprise for you, now wouldn't it?" Konan replied lightly.

"But what will I do while I'm waiting?" she sighed; the older woman raised an eyebrow at her.

She almost replied: "Whatever you've been doing these past two months." But thought better of it. Instead she pulled some paper out

from a drawer in the desk she was sitting at, and put it on the tabletop. "Come here. I've got something you can do."

Curiously Nariko wandered over to the desk, and Konan held up one perfectly square sheet of paper. Nariko cocked her head slightly to the side, childlike curiosity evident.

"What is it?" she asked. It was obvious it was paper, though she didn't seem to know what she was supposed to do with it.

"I'll teach you to make something from it," Konan replied with a smile, "Let me show you."

She positioned the paper on the wooden surface; she paused, placing her hands in place, and then she began to fold. She had folded so many paper things that she could count, the movements so well practiced that she could fold them with a combination of chakra and her mind. But what could be done without wasting chakra was done without wasting chakra. Her hands had folded so many pieces of paper that she had discovered and practiced the perfect efficiency to which to make the folds. She could make a piece of origami with swift movements and not have a single flaw. In the time span of about fifteen seconds she had folded her paper and a small crane now rested in her palm. Nariko looked delighted.

"You can teach me to do that?" she asked, her eyes wide.

Konan nodded, "I can teach you the steps, but don't worry about speed—that came with years of practice. I'll teach you the different kinds of folds, and their names, and then I will show you how to fold a crane. After you get the hang of it, I'll tell you a different set of steps to make something else. Okay?"

They spent the rest of the morning folding origami, and every hour Nariko would check the window dutifully. After a while, Nariko had remembered the steps and was folding carefully away as she slowly folded the paper to create little creatures. She had asked how Konan had been able to make them fold by themselves, and if she would be

able to do the same herself—the older woman found this very amusing, and caused the girl disappointment by telling her that she would not be able to make the paper fold itself for a long time.

Nariko didn't bother Konan as she resumed her work, only getting up to check the window and asking the occasional question on what she was doing wrong when her crane didn't turn out how she wanted it to be. There was one point at which Nariko uttered a severe curse word when she paper cut herself, much to Konan's surprise rather than alarm—it turned out that Nariko had picked up on some of Hidan's language despite avoiding him like the plague. Other than that, it was quiet...for a time.

"That man in the cell the other day," Nariko said cautiously, not looking up from her piece of paper, "Deidara-sama said you didn't know who he was. Did you find out?"

Konan paused, she was surprised that Nariko would even care about the prisoner in the cell, or even remember him. It probably reflected on how much she had to do around the base, if she remembered things like that.

"No, we didn't," she replied truthfully.

"Oh," Nariko mumbled, and then said nothing further.

Reflecting back on the interrogation, she had gained very little. Pretending to be a helpless victim had gotten a glance at her from the man, but nothing further. She had waited an hour and a half before she dared speak—she knew that he would be suspicious of her even if she did appear to be a victim of Akatsuki, because he was one of Konoha's ANBU, and they never let their guard down.

"So, what you do to get yourself thrown down in this dump by those bastards?" she asked with a bitterness in her voice that didn't inaccurately reflect how she actually felt about Akatsuki.

"I made a mistake," was the stony reply; he didn't even look at her.

Not only had she failed to get him to admit that he had been on a rescue mission, she had also failed to find out his name, his rank—though it was pretty obvious he was ANBU—where he came from—which was also obvious—or even that he was a shinobi. A few hours of sitting in the dark alone, she didn't manage to gain much scope about him other than the fact that he was married. Her advances would irritate most men who weren't interested in her, those who were loyal and married flat-out refused her and would give her a certain look. The prisoner had had given her that look.

She sighed quietly to herself, ignoring Nariko as she got up to check the window again, even if she had gotten a name from the man, it wouldn't tell her much, as it was probably his ANBU code name. Konan was so wrapped up in her internal brooding that she almost jumped when Nariko let out an exclamation—almost; she wasn't someone who was easily startled.

"I see them! I see three people coming!" Nariko exclaimed excitedly pointing out the window, "And one of them is Itachi-sama!"

Nariko almost tripped over her own feet as she rushed down to the main doors that she had slipped out of just a week previously. Itachi, Kisame, and a third person—whom Nariko had never seen before—were just coming in from outside, stamping their feet to shake the snow off of their boots. Nariko skidded to a stop in front of them, but her foot caught a piece of loose snow and she slipped gracelessly to the floor. The three of them, and the two door guards, all looked at her as she picked herself up from the floor, blushing terribly.

"You are in too much of a hurry...Nariko," Itachi said as the girl dusted herself off.

Behind her, Nariko heard Flower-chan give a quiet chuckle, but it was not a mean chuckle. Undaunted Nariko smiled at Itachi, so glad to see him after so long; two months—or at least that's the amount of time she thought Flower-chan had said he'd been gone—really had seemed like forever.

"Itachi-sama, I'm so glad to see you! I missed you so much!" she said bouncing up and down on her feet, "I have so many things to tell you about when you were gone, and you have to tell me what you saw, and what took you so long!"

Nariko thought she saw the look on his face soften a little and her smile widened.

"Not now," Kisame said in that strange voice of his that frightened Nariko deeply, "There will be plenty of time to talk later. Itachi-san has things to do."

She nodded, looking away hastily; she did not like being addressed by those that she feared. Too much attention drawn to her could only lead to trouble; best keep out of sight and out of people's way. Her gaze had come to rest on the third and final person that was standing there—the one she didn't know.

It was the first time that she had noticed them; it was man that looked about the same age as Kisame, he wasn't that tall though, just as tall as her. His hair was a blackish-grey that had a few streaks of white in it; it was cut relatively short, but it came down in the front and barely hid his eyes. Those eyes were unlike any Nariko had ever seen before—they were slightly yellowish and they shone with a calculative gleam. His gaze unnerved Nariko, but she could not look away from him; the look was so deep that Nariko felt apprehensive. She didn't know why, but she thought that the man could see the demon in her, that's how deep his gaze seemed to go, and she covered her stomach self-consciously.

"Who's that?" she asked quietly.

It was then that Flower-chan came out of the shadows of the hall where she had been standing; the man finally broke his gaze with her, and glanced at the azure-haired woman. A strange look came over his face, and he looked firmly away from anyone, staring hard at the ground; Nariko could see that he was standing very stiffly. Turning her head, she looked at the older woman, and was surprised

to see that her face was deadly serious; she had expecting her usual impish smile that Nariko was so used to by now.

"Itachi, Kisame, it is good to see you have returned safely," Flower-chan spoke with such formality that Nariko became very confused. "Much has happened in your absence, and now that you have returned we must confer about the evacuation of the mountain."

"Evacuation?" Kisame asked, his already frightening face becoming even more so when he frowned.

"Yes, all will be explained in the meeting. Kisame, proceed to the meeting room; Itachi, I will assist you in dealing with your... acquaintance, and we shall join him shortly," Flower-chan spoke, folding her hands pleasantly in front of her, she then turned to Nariko, "Kit, please return to my quarters and continue what you were doing before coming down here. You won't be able to move back to Itachi's quarters until the later, so please wait patiently."

Nariko nodded mutely. Kisame readjusted the huge weapon on his back and wandered off down one of the hallways, glancing back only once to give a look to Itachi and Flower-chan that Nariko was unable to interpret. Flower-chan motioned to Itachi and the man and both began to follow her quietly. Nariko, who had been hoping they would be going the same direction as her, was glad to see that they were. She glanced once at the door guards and then brought up the rear of the other three.

At the point that Nariko was supposed to turn off, she ducked into the hallway and waited for a few seconds before deciding to creep after them again. She had never gotten to find out whom the other person had been, and she was so deeply fascinated by them that she wanted to find out more. She merely thought to herself to hide, to be quiet and unseen and they did not seem to notice her. It had worked the other two times when she had been following Deidara and Flower-chan, and now it seemed to work again.

"No bonds for this one?" Flower-chan asked, looking at the strange man who Nariko wanted to know more about.

"He caused trouble at first, but he is more cooperative now," Itachi replied, not looking at the man, "He refuses to speak to anymore, but he seems to have resigned himself to his fate, therefore it does not matter to me whether he chooses to speak or not."

"There are very few who are like that," Flower-chan commented smugly, "Go kicking and screaming the whole way. The Jinchuuriki for the Rokubi is still oblivious—she's been exceptionally well behaved. Gets herself into trouble though, despite her innocence."

"Trouble?" Itachi asked, turning his head to glance at Flower-chan, "What sort of trouble?"

"She's so curious—she went outside when she discovered that it snowed outside and almost froze to death. If her Bijuu's chakra hadn't been growing stronger as she had grown weaker, we probably wouldn't have found her in time," Flower-chan said; Nariko blushed, even though Flower-chan had said it in a mildly affectionate voice, "She also seems to have discovered a way of masking her chakra, though I don't think she realizes that she's doing it. We had a couple of prisoners when you were away—that'll be discussed in the meeting—and both times that I went to interrogate them, she followed Deidara and me along the way. She could be following us now for all I know."

Nariko almost tripped on the last statement. She knew very well that she was the Jinchuuriki for the Rokubi, though what exactly that meant, she wasn't sure. So she knew they were talking about her, even if there was a lot of stuff she didn't understand, like 'masking her chakra', so the last statement had alarmed her.

"I don't think she would though," Flower-chan added, her voice turning serious, "She's like a child trapped in a woman's body—she hasn't developed the corrupt adult mind that the rest of us have."

They were in the place where Nariko had first seen that old man—Jiraiya—the 'writer'. It was in the exact same door that Flower-chan now opened with a set of keys, and after Itachi indicated for it, the strange man entered the room without a word. After locking the door, Flower-chan and Itachi turned down a different hallway and continued walking. Flower-chan's voice carried down the hallway one last time before Nariko could no longer hear it.

"You owe me a visit tonight..." and then there was silence.

Nariko had ducked into the shadows of a doorway when the two members of Akatsuki had stopped, and now that they were gone, she came out again and approached the door where the man had been put. There was a window in it, with a small metal grill over the hole, and as she stood before it, she could barely see over the bottom edge. She stood on tiptoe and peered inside.

"Hello?" she asked, curiously; and at first there was silence to greet her. Itachi had said that he had refused to talk, and Nariko wondered if he wouldn't talk to her either, when finally a voice replied.

"Who's there?" the voice reminded Nariko of two rocks being scraped together.

Nariko was about to answer when the man's two yellow eyes gleamed out from the darkness at her. She squeaked and fell backwards, losing balance from standing on the tip of her toes, the man's sudden appearance startling her.

"You're that girl from earlier," he said calmly, his voice velvety now, "Why are you here?"

Nariko picked herself up from the ground and dusted herself off for the second time that day, "I...I don't know. I guess I just wanted to find out who you are."

She shuffled nervously on the spot, thinking maybe she shouldn't have come, that maybe she should have returned to Flower-chan's

suite like she had been asked to do.

"Why do you care?" he asked, and she looked at him in surprise.

"Well...I guess...well, I never got to find out... Flower-chan—the lady with the blue hair—she came in and you...I guess you kinda looked...funny."

"Funny?" the man asked, and she could see him raise an eyebrow slightly in the dim light of the hall.

"Yeah, I mean, you looked at her and then looked away, and you were standing like a..." Nariko couldn't think of anything to compare it to at the moment.

"Scarecrow?" the man suggested, though his voice was devoid of amusement.

"Sure," Nariko replied, not sure what a scarecrow was, "I guess I just wanted to know more about you because of that."

"The blue haired woman, this Flower-chan, do you know her?" the man asked, his eyes glinting strangely and Nariko felt very nervous under his gaze all of a sudden.

"A little, I guess," Nariko mumbled, hardly daring to look at him yet unable to break her gaze away, "Why? Do you know her?"

"Not personally, no," the man said bitterly, "Her name is Konan, and she used to be from my shinobi village, Kumogakure. She was exceptionally talented, became the pride of our village; she was from a smaller branch village near mine, but she quickly escalated up through the ranks and found herself almost within the Raikage's inner circle. Wanted in every bingo book by our enemies, still is, except now she's in our bingo book too."

Almost all of this meant nothing to Nariko, she had never heard of Kumogakure, didn't know what a 'shinobi' was or knew about any

Raikages. And then there was that name again...Konan... She had heard the leader call Flower-chan that too, so maybe it really *was* her real name. Nariko wasn't sure how to respond to all this information.

"Really? Why is she here now, then?" was all that she could think of to answer.

"I don't know," the man replied dolefully, "I don't really know what the Akatsuki want. I don't really care anymore; I know they want the Shichibi from me, and I've resigned myself to that fate."

"Shichibi..." Nariko echoed, "They sometimes refer to me as the Rokubi. Does that mean you have a demon in you too?"

There was a small nod from the person on the other side of the grate. Delight found itself inside Nariko, for the longest time she had begun to wonder if she was the only person in the world who had a demon inside her, and now there was another one standing on the other side of this door.

"What's your name?" she asked excitedly, though the man didn't seem to share in her enthusiasm.

"Does it matter? The moment I came here I no longer had a name," was the blatant reply.

Nariko blinked, "Why is that? I didn't have a name until I came here."

"They named you?" the voice sounded surprised.

"Yes. ...Is that so strange?"

"For them, yes," the host of the Shichibi replied, Nariko had nothing better to call him.

"You don't like the Akatsuki much do you?" she asked, sounding disappointed.

There was a bitter laugh, "Not really no."

"Why is that?"

"They're dangerous," was the reply, "The only reason I'm not struggling anymore to get free is because here is better than where I came from. I've got nothing to lose except my life, I might as well accept it."

Nariko heard the words but missed the implication that the Jinchuuriki was going to die, so she tried to cheer him up, "It's alright. They're not that mean. The only thing I don't understand is: if you're just like me, why have they locked you up in here?"

"What I don't understand is why they haven't locked *you* up just like they have to me," the Jinchuuriki replied, "I'm surprised they let you run around the way that you do."

"Why do you say that? Why would they lock me up? I don't want to run away, or anything," Nariko was saying but the look on the other side of the door was beginning to frighten her, "They've shown me such kindness, why would I want to run?"

The expression of the man on the other side of the door was incredulous, "Don't you know what they're going to do to you?"

Nariko knew that they would take the demon from her, and she would go free. But that couldn't be what he was talking about otherwise the look he was giving her would appear different. She shook her head uncertainly, almost afraid to answer.

"...What are they going to do to me?" she asked, her voice quiet.

The man didn't answer, but the look he wore on his face alarmed her. His eyes grew very sad and the look he pierced her with was the strongest one yet—when he looked at her like that, he looked like he was feeling really sorry for her. It was a look that profoundly affected her, one that she couldn't forget for the rest of her days. The eyes

blinked, and then the man walked away from the window, Nariko didn't even think about calling out to him, her mind was too busy trying to figure out why she was so nervous. For the first time since she arrived in the mountain that Akatsuki hid in, she felt afraid.

A/N: Chapter Forty finished. Whew! ...You know what I hate about most SasuSaku fics on this site? Whenever there's a marriage between them, the wedding ring Sakura gets always has to be a huge rock of a ring. Girls like shiny things, yes, but think about it people, is Sasuke really that insightful? And they're NINJA, people. Something huge like that would only serve to get caught on something at the most inconvenient moment. Not to mention wedding rings spell out to enemies: "I have a significant other that you can hurt and use against me." I just don't see where people get off, but then again, there are some pretty impractical fanfictions on this site, so I suppose I shouldn't be surprised.

Editor's Note: BTW, I love all you people who said it's Sidian's fault and not mine. –hug–

Chapter 41

A/N: Today I'd like to start off by talking about rants. They're part of what I do when it comes to author's notes. I like writing them, they're fun, sometimes pointless, sometimes nonsensical, sometimes about serious topics. A lot of them are written at the beginning of chapters when the page is blank, just to make the whiteness seem less intimidating. I usually keep them there because on the web it gives it a sort of structured appearance. I like reading author's notes myself, because it makes the author seem human, not some ungodly power that I feel that I have to leave a New York Times styled review for, but can leave a comment from one equal individual to another. That's another reason why I leave them here, because I don't want my readers treating me like some humorless forty-year old bag, but as someone around their own age who they can get to know a little about. My rants are often just my opinion on certain topics, or about what's going on in my life at the moment. But there are some people who are just taking them too seriously. They're not meant to be offensive, yet some people get offended anyways, well if you get offended by my rants, then you might as well get offended because I like blue and you don't, you like red instead. Also, even though not everyone's offended, people comment on them in reviews. That's okay, but when you say nothing about the chapter, then I don't get any input on how to improve. You can comment on the rants as long as you say something about the chapter too. My rants are supposed to be fun to read, just like the little author's comments on sides of manga pages and the like. For those who get offended, stop taking them so seriously, that's not the point.

Important Notice: Due to Exams, schoolwork, and life in general keeping me from being up to speed on writing, **I will be putting Blind on hold until Wednesday, April 9, 2008.** Thank you for your understanding. As I've promised before, I will finish this story.

Warning: Hidan Language Ahead I hate writing Hidan Language... Why does he have to be so foul-mouthed anyways? -.-

Chapter Forty-One: Fateful Choices

There was a specific room that was used for meetings, and while it wasn't nearly as well furnished as some of the other bases, there was a simple table and some chairs for them to discuss at. The table wasn't really needed, as they rarely had papers present, however to be seated in a ring in the middle of the room, without a table altogether, seemed a bit ridiculous. It was this specific room that Itachi and Konan made their way towards, dropping all conversation and walking as if neither was aware of the other. This was part of the game that they played, the lie they lived, they had little contact when it came to Akatsuki itself.

As they entered the room, they each went their separate ways: Itachi seated himself in an empty chair next to Kisame while Konan sat herself near the head of the table. The room was relatively empty, Kisame and Kakuzu being the only ones there before he and Konan arrived, each seated in places that they had long since designated as their own. Kisame glanced at Itachi as he sat, but did not speak; in contrast, he did not look at Kisame but muttered to him in a low voice.

"I assume everyone is coming," though he hadn't phrased it that way, it was a question. His Sharingan eyes scanned the different people one by one, Zetsu walking in as he spoke, Tobi following behind with a light bounce in his step.

Kisame shrugged, eyeing Zetsu warily—nobody in Akatsuki truly trusted one another, "I think everyone is present in the mountain—we were the only ones absent."

Itachi nodded, but not speak further, for Deidara had just walked in through the door, and caught his attention. He observed as the self-proclaimed artist crossed the room, grinning broadly at Konan when he spotted her, but said artist's gaze shifted to the elder Uchiha brother mid-way across the room, and his face fouled instantly.

Deidara did not look away from him as he crossed the remainder of the room and seated himself deliberately across from him. Itachi didn't even blink, but still wondered how to interpret Deidara's movements; if it was a fight he wanted, he had already proven to him that his Sharingan was superior to his exploding pieces of clay that he called 'art'. Idiot boy. He was still resentful after all these years for being forced into Akatsuki. Itachi looked away dismissively and out of the corner of his eye he saw Deidara begin to fume about being put out of mind so easily.

Itachi didn't really know what to make of Deidara, he was a strange man with an obsession with explosives, claiming they were his art form. He didn't know why their Leader had chosen such a foolhardy boy to join Akatsuki—if it had been him, he would have never chosen Deidara. But he did not dare contradict their leader, even if he loathed him; he did what he was told, and it kept him alive.

The room was almost full now, missing only two people: Hidan being the first, who was probably deliberately taking his time in an act of defiance towards their Leader, and the second was Pein himself. A few moments later, he arrived, and after scanning the room, his Rinnegan eyes lingering for a moment on Hidan's empty seat, he stood at the head of the table, Konan at his right hand. There was a pause, and then he indicated for her to speak; she rose as he sat, and cleared her throat. When she spoke, her eyes were empty, void of their mischievous spark and her voice was hollow of emotion.

She always stepped into the persona of the "Messenger of God" when she was around Pein; her voice would lose its tone and she would become emotionless. Her flirting and mischievous, suggestive smiles would disappear, regardless of who she spoke with—as long as Pein was in the vicinity, she would suppress her true self. This was one of the few things that Itachi had noticed about Konan, and even though she had never told him any of her deeper secrets, he had been around her enough to know that the person she actually was did not meet Pein's approval in regards to the role she was to play as "God's Angel".

"Everyone has been called here to discuss our plans in regards to our winter migration to Amegakure. Due to recent events that have taken place, this needs to be conducted earlier than usually scheduled," Konan accounted, saying it mostly for Kisame and him, who had not been present during the supposed events that taken place during their absence, "Itachi and Kisame, welcome back from your journey and we commend you on the success of delivering the Jinchuuriki of the Shichibi. However, during your absence there was an incident that occurred a month after you left; as spy was caught and detained within the mountain."

If Itachi's attention hadn't been alerted by the mention of a spy, the next bit of information that was spoken certainly did.

"He was one of Konohagakure's three Sannin, Jiraiya," Konan continued, "And until a week ago, he was a prisoner here; a Konoha strike team—rank ANBU—performed a successful infiltration and were able to free him. Though we gave pursuit, they got away, save for one member who became separated from his team. He is currently being held, but thus far all attempts at extracting information have been unsuccessful. Itachi, with your knowledge of ANBU, we would like you to see if you can identify the member in the event that he's a senior member."

Itachi gave a mute nod. The information was still processing in his head. First Jiraiya had been spying on the organization from outside the mountain, and now he had gotten away, leaving nothing but a nameless ANBU, who would most likely be resistant to torture of any form. There had been a slightly disgruntled tone in the way that Konan had said that no information had been extracted yet; Itachi was amused by this, for she had obviously tried herself, and got nothing. He knew she didn't like to be ignored.

"So, now you are up to speed," she said with a note of finality before turning to the rest of the table, "Our position has been made—obviously we would have left for Amegakure already if we had not been awaiting Kisame and Itachi's return, however it was necessary to delay. We need to move quickly before Konoha comes again to

rescue their missing ANBU, but as things are now, we have two Jinchuuriki on base. What we must decide is this: what are we going to do with them?"

With this final statement, Konan took her seat, folding her hands in her lap and sat with her back rigidly straight. It was then that the door to the room opened rather noisily and Hidan swaggered in defiantly. All eyes were on him as he began to cross the room, and Pein in particular looked displeased with the man's loud entry. Itachi himself allowed some disgust to enter his neutral mood; he disliked Hidan, and that was putting it nicely.

"It is good of you to finally join us, Hidan," Pein commented as the foul-mouth Akatsuki member sat down in the last available seat.

"Yeah, like I give a damn," he spat in return, "What have we decided?"

"Nothing yet," Konan replied coolly, "and had you been here when summoned, perhaps you would know what we were going to discuss."

Hidan muttered something to himself that sounded like it involved less than pleasant replies; knowing Hidan, that was exactly what it contained. Itachi saw an angry look cross Konan's face, part of her own personality emerging as she stared him down.

"Care to say that to my face a little louder, Hidan?" there was a threat in her voice, and while she still used his name, Itachi knew that there was enough of her real self there to cause a problem if she was provoked further.

"Wouldn't you like that, now, bitch?" he smirked in reply, but all that was returned to him was a cold stare. Itachi glanced at Hidan once, his thoughts disapproving of the man's behaviour. He had always been resentful that Konan paid less attention to him than she did with either himself or Deidara, though Itachi didn't really care who she spent her time with, as long as physically he wasn't affected.

Konan did her line of work professionally and with care so as not to pick up any of the things circulating around in the general populace. Itachi was not particularly worried about his time spent with her.

"What is there to decide, anyways?" Deidara asked, breaking the tension before a fight could start, "We have both Jinchuuriki, why don't we just seal them and leave?"

"Jiraiya's presence here was longer than any of us thought initially," Kakuzu replied his gravelly voice sounding ominous in the relatively silent room, "That was how the ANBU Team made our position. They could strike again in the middle of the sealing ritual. It would take us six days to seal the Bijuu alone, not accounting for days where we recover our energy. Damage during this raid was extensive, if another raid were to come, it would cost even further for repairs."

"Maybe the reason they haven't attacked again already is because they expect us to have moved by now," Deidara countered, drumming his fingers on the table, bored.

"And how long would it take them to find out that we have not?" Itachi remarked coldly; the boy wasn't all that smart at times. His head was too filled up with his notions of art, "It is too risky—Konoha do not leave their own behind. They care for and protect those around them."

"Ironical that you came from that village, what with your clan being dead because of you and all," Deidara remarked snidely.

"Enough, Deidara," the leader spoke and the artist quickly fell silent, "Itachi's input at this meeting greatly outweighs yours, as he knows more about Konoha than you ever would."

There was no remark from Deidara, though he was still sitting with a rather smug look on his face, glancing at the eldest Uchiha out of the corner of his eye. The boy knew that he had hit a nerve though Itachi was not fool enough to let it show. He had been angered by the comment, though he had no idea why the comment had affected him

as such. The underlying statement was true enough, and the clan was dead by his hands. He could do nothing to reverse that, even though he still felt the discomfort that came with the flashes of memory. He would not be bothered by the action he had committed, nothing further could be done about it, and therefore it deserved no attention.

"He is right, it is too risky to seal them before we leave," the Leader continued, distracting Itachi momentarily.

"Then what's the fucking issue here?" Hidan asked irritably, "We just take them both to Ame and seal them there! It's that damn easy."

"The Rokubi Jinchuuriki, known as Nariko, doesn't know what fate awaits her," it was Konan that spoke this time, "It would not be an issue to tell her or imprison her if the seal on Raijuu, the six-tailed weasel, was not weak. Itachi has told me that it is loose, and not including his own personal experiences to support this statement, I myself have witnessed the seeping of the weasel's power in two cases. I believe that if she knew her fate, her fear and instinctive self-preservation may release the Bijuu. We cannot let her and the Shichibi come in contact with one another no more than they already have."

"Then merely keep them from one another," Zetsu proposed, his voice quiet, "Yes, keep them from knowing what the other is."

"Both would require supervision at all times while we are on the move, by the members of Akatsuki themselves, and it would slow us," Konan argued, and it was at this point that Itachi began to grow suspicious of the motives behind her arguments, "We do not have the resources to do this, most of the mountain has been sent ahead to settle. The only reason we're all still here is because of the possible sealing. We can't seal any while half are already on the move."

"Then we haven't decided anything yet," Kisame snapped grouchy, "We can't take them, we can't seal them both; what would you

suggest?"

"Seal one, and leave the other until a later time," Itachi replied, staring hard at Konan, who returned his gaze evenly for a moment, but then turned to Kisame to nod once.

"Then which one do we seal?" Deidara asked, sitting up straighter and looking at Konan as well. Maybe he wasn't as stupid as Itachi gave him credit for. He certainly seemed to be picking up on the same thing that Itachi had been.

The way that Konan argued the case for Nariko had been a little more emotional than he had expected from her, or at least, to his ears it had been. He wondered if leaving Nariko under her care had been a mistake; had Konan developed an attachment to the girl that was the host to the six-tailed weasel? Deidara, who had undoubtedly spent time with Konan in his absence, seemed to be thinking so, or at least the artist's body language suggested as much.

Konan was refusing to meet the gaze of either of them and kept her attention firmly on the leader right at that moment. Pein was silent for a moment and then turned to return her gaze.

"You have been the most recent caretaker of the Rokubi, what is her current state of health?" Pein asked, his voice calm.

"Her last examination of her physical condition showed promise for her health. Muscle tissue has strengthened and with the assistance of the medics some of the deteriorated tissue has begun to grow back. However that inspection was before she almost froze to death a few days ago, I have yet to look up on the results of her recovery that were given upon her release from the infirmary. And I have been unable to inspect the most recent Jinchuuriki," Konan stated, though Itachi could see the slightly apprehension in the way she sat.

"Does the Shichibi seem healthy enough for the sealing procedure?" Pein asked both Itachi and Kisame, but before Itachi could weigh the answer, Kisame replied.

"He's healthy, and strong—almost took off my head when we first grabbed him," Kisame spoke, an acknowledging grin on his face, all the pointed teeth showing, "He's a certainty for health, I say we seal him rather than get the girl checked up on."

Pein paused to take this into consideration and after a while, he nodded, "Very well, we shall seal the Shichibi and then depart for Amegakure."

The following details and information that were announced seemed to fade out to Itachi as he sat for a moment in confusion. Something inside of him had slackened upon the selection of the Shichibi, and he began to doubt his own thoughts. Had he too been apprehensive like Konan had been? Had he been secretly hoping that the fate of the Rokubi was not to come to pass just yet? He shook the thought; it was impossible.

After Kanaye had left, Sakura had done her best to regain her composure; she didn't know how she felt about Sasuke going and getting him from her home, but she supposed that she felt a little better about everything that had happened. She went back to pretending that nothing was wrong, even though Sasuke had already seen her lapse. She didn't want to burden him any further with her emotions, and while she could see the uncertainty in the way he acted around her, she did her best to act normal. She knew that Sasuke was uncertain of how to treat the situation, and she hoped that he would do like he would have done as a boy, and followed her lead in pretending nothing was wrong.

He didn't mention anything or talk about earlier that morning, but Sakura could hear the uncertainty when he spoke, and noticed that his words were very carefully selected. He wasn't helping much in the way of keeping her mind off the source of her sadness. Things had been slightly bettered by the arrival of her brother, she smiled as she recalled the things they had talked about, primarily about memories that they had shared with their father: times that they had felt frustrated with their father and times where they were proud to

have him as their father. They didn't know if they were going to see him ever again, but they could hope, but that hope had to be without doubt. Tears were okay, Kanaye had told her, but only for so long. Though Sakura had not said it to him, she thought that she had no right for tears, specifically because there was hope.

The knife in her hand came down more forcefully on the defenseless onion than she had intended it to as she tried to force her thoughts back into their prison. No thoughts on her father, none at all, she could not think about it while there was so much left to be done. The mission reports had been submitted yesterday, yes, but she still had a lot of yard work, laundry and other things to do. They still had to celebrate Naruto's birthday, and she still had no idea what to get him. She chopped a few more of the onions with force, a few tears had leaked into her eyes—tears not related to the fumes of the poor vegetable that she was currently ripping stem from stem. There was a sharp knock at the back door.

"Sasuke, can you get the door?" she called; she didn't want to answer it—the last time someone had called, it had brought bad news with it.

After the quiet confirming 'aa' from Sasuke, followed by his departure down the hall, she put down the knife and hurriedly wiped the tears from her eyes. She looked at the maimed onion on the cutting board, observing the horrible chopping she had done as all the pieces were irregular shapes and parts of the onion was more like a pulp than diced bits. Closing her eyes, she decided to forget the onion and listened instead to what was being said at the door. The voices were far too faint, and she only recognized Sasuke's; whoever it was, wasn't someone they knew, because she heard the door shut. Sasuke's footsteps came down hall towards her, she turned as he paused in the entryway. He was holding a plain brown envelope in his hands, and when she walked over to him, he handed it to her.

"Who was at the door?" she asked, as she tore the top of the envelope open.

"Someone of little consequence who had a message from the Hokage for you," Sasuke replied, as Sakura pulled out the few sheets of paper.

There were a couple of cheques, one with her name written on it, and one with Sasuke's name on it, a large sum of money written underneath, followed by the Hokage's signature. She tucked those two pieces of paper securely in her fingers before moving them behind the bigger sheet of paper so that she could read what written there. At the first glance she realized that it was a letter from the Tsunade directed specifically at her. She read the letter once, and a cold sensation of shock washed over her; she read it over a second time, and then anger began to seize her. Her grasp on the piece of paper was so tight that the page crinkled where her thumb was pressed against it.

"Sakura?" Sasuke asked questioningly, "What does it say?"

She shook her head firmly, and gave him his cheque, and then walked back to the cutting board with the maimed onion upon it. She glanced at the letter and cheque in her hands and then realized she had given Sasuke the wrong cheque in her anger. She rounded about and crossed to where Sasuke was still standing, unmoving. She traded cheques with him, but before she could walk off again, he took her wrist firmly.

"What is written in the letter, Sakura?" he asked again, and once again she shook her head firmly.

"It's nothing, I just need to think of a way to deal with it and it'll all be oka—" she started, trying to walk away, but Sasuke's grasp on her wrist tightened.

"Sakura," there was a warning tone in his voice, "What does it say?"

She sighed, and then faced him. She held the letter in front of her, and read it aloud to him, her voice bitter. She knew that it sounded

bitter, but she couldn't help it, and try as she might, she couldn't change it.

" Sakura,

I'm glad to hear that you returned safely from your journey despite the several mishaps that you experienced. Your team has gone through much more than I think any of us could have anticipated, though I am glad it was successful. And while the Raikage is begrudgingly asking us assistance in the abuse that they have been receiving from Orochimaru, our relations seem to have improved slightly. At least he is willing to ask for help. Please extend my apologies to Sasuke in regards to his near arrest.

I have had the chance to evaluate both yours and Sasuke's mission reports—Naruto's I believe will be a week overdue—and I must applaud Sasuke in his revelation upon this new technique he has developed. By the sounds of things, not only has Sasuke managed to become accustomed to his blindness through your assistance, but it also seems that he is able to get by on entirely different level. Judging by the remarks and the skill that Sasuke has made on the mission—an assessment made through the comments in your mission report—I believe that it is time that your mission as Uchiha Sasuke's rehabilitator and caregiver has come to a close. Your mission has been successful and I relieve you from it now. The cheque will be mailed to you after you have departed from the Uchiha residence and returned home.

I assume that you have been told about the circumstances about your father, and I send you my sincerest sympathies. It is unfortunate about what has happened to your father and the best thing available at this time is to hope that he is safe and will be able to return to Konoha in his own time. It may be a comfort to you to know that thanks to your assistance, despite your late-night arrival and tiredness, Jiraiya is most likely going to make a full recovery. I had a chance to examine him yesterday morning, and his condition is improving already. Your father's status only came into existence because he did what he believed necessary in order to return Jiraiya

to us, and it was you, his daughter, that made sure his sacrifices were not in vain.

If there is anything I can do for you, please ask. I will do my best to be there for you and your family during this hard time.

Sincerely,

Fifth Hokage of Konohagakure, the Village Hidden in the Leaves,

Tsunade

P.S. I have enclosed two cheques made out to you and Sasuke. These are payments for escorting Tokugawa Manzo to Kumogakure. "

Sakura finished reading and studied Sasuke's face. Her anger faded and was suddenly replaced with nervousness. She was worried, but she tried not to show it; the biggest qualm she had with the letter was Tsunade's direct order for her to leave the Uchiha manor and return home, but now that she had read it aloud to Sasuke, she began to wonder. What if he agreed with the statement that she should return home? Then it was not her place to disagree with the letter. She bit her lip slightly.

"I guess I shouldn't be angry about this letter," she said softly, "I mean, it's your call whether I should stay. I mean I want to, but only if you'll have me here. But I'd like to ask, if I can stay...just a little longer, that is. After all this has happened, I don't want to be alone. And I know I have my family, but...I just want to be here with you, because...I can't really explain. ...I guess I trust you, trust you to be there...trust you not to say anything, trust you not to try and make it better with words."

Dammit, when had she started to cry again? She wiped the tears hastily away, hoping that—though knowing that it was impossible for him not to—he would not notice them. His silence was making her nervous, making her begin to believe that maybe she shouldn't have

spoken. She loved him, and while what she had said was true, that was the truest reason why she found solace at his side. She was worried that maybe it was too obvious that that was the underlying reason when she had spoken.

"Stay," he said simply, "You made it my choice to decide, so I decide that you should stay."

Relief poured over her like a wave of warm water, and she allowed herself to savor the moment. He was letting her stay; she would not have to endure the nights alone and she would not have to worry about worrying her mother or brother. But then something occurred to her, and she bit her lip slightly again.

"I don't know if that will be good enough for Tsunade-sama," she muttered grimly, directed partially at him, and partially at herself.

"The Hokage has ordered you leave because she believes that you have nothing left to be done here, correct?" Sasuke asked her sounding confused, and she nodded once, looking up at him to find a small frown on his handsome features, "Haven't you told her about our goal to restore my eyesight?"

"No, not yet," Sakura replied, and then something clicking inside her mind; it was like someone had doused her anger in water, causing her resolve to harden like steel, "But I think you just provided the answer for me."

She looked at Sasuke and for the first time that day, she smiled—even though it was a small one. Embracing Sasuke briefly, and almost hesitantly, she muttered a quiet thank you. She wasn't sure of what to make of his desire for her to stay, especially since up until recently he had been upset with her, but whatever the reason, she was happy that he had allowed her to stay by him, for now.

Talking with Sakura after Kanaye had left had not been easy; with her brother gone, Sasuke felt incompetent to be the one to make

sure that Sakura was all right. He didn't know what to do, if anything. He didn't know if he should be worried that Sakura had gone back to pretending that nothing was the matter, and then the incident involving the letter had also thrown him off a little. She had been angry, but he didn't know what to make of that, considering her overall mood. After he had told her she could stay, she seemed relieved, and after she came up with a solution to explaining to the Hokage why she should stay, Sasuke felt that he had managed to head off some other negative moods that would have hung around her like a shroud. But after that had been resolved, she returned to maintaining her façade of being fine.

She was doing a good job in retaining the look that everything was fine; it was very convincing—to anyone but those who could detect her chakra signature as well as he could. Had he lacked the ability to detect her mood, then maybe he would have been convinced that she was fine—save for one thing. That was when she could not longer hold her grief in and she fell to pieces. This didn't happen very often, but in the three days that it had been since her father was declared as good as dead, Sakura had lost control on five occasions. It was then that he did the only thing that he knew how to do at all: sit quietly next to her while she spilled her emotions out in the form of silent, but shuddering sobs. Whenever this happened, she would whisper apologies over and over, amid her tears. Sometimes he knew that she was apologizing for her tears, but other times he felt that she was apologizing for what happened to him—what he told her.

This time, however, as he sat with her, her face buried in his shoulder, she was uncharacteristically quiet; she was fighting her tears, he knew, but she was trembling. He hadn't yet put forth the suggestion of anti-depressants to her—how could he? Considering how the Hokage almost had her evicted from his house and that her father had just recently gone missing, it was a delicate thing to suggest. But Kanaye had expressed confidence that she would listen to him if he were the one to suggest it. He rubbed Sakura's back subconsciously, waiting until she was calm enough to listen to the

suggestion, though she would also be calm enough to be insulted by it too. He opened his eyes and extinguished his senses, allowing the scrambled shades of gray to splash across his vision. Sasuke was not good at putting things tactically at the best of times, so when he finally spoke, he did things as he normally did: put things straightforwardly and bluntly.

"Sakura, you need to start thinking about taking some anti-depressants," he said firmly, but not harshly; his voice was relatively quiet, "This can't keep happening; something has to be done about it."

She stiffened slightly in his arms, and pulled away; he could imagine the expression on her face: hurt, apologetic, and ashamed. Her voice only enforced the expression in his mind as her voice sounded frightened, "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry, Sasuke, I know I shouldn't burden you with my emotions, I know that I'm probably annoying you and—"

He activated his senses briefly so he could put a finger to her lips to silence her, the mixed signals of chakra and sight confusing him a little, "That's not it, Sakura, and you know it. People are worried about you: your brother's worried about you, and your mother is probably worried about you too."

'I'm *worried about you*,' he added quietly in his head, though he did not voice it because he believed that his own personal concerns were irrelevant at the moment.

"You said all you wanted was to be by my side because I wouldn't use words to try and make things seem better. I'm doing exactly that right now: I'm not using words to make it better, I'm using them to tell you the truth. Being by me might help you be able to deal with the pain, but it isn't helping anything else. You need to do this for yourself, not for me—not because you think you're annoying me. Your tasks are hindered when you're like this."

He saw that this last comment was the wrong one to say as her face became further distraught. Dammit, why did he have to be the one to do this? He cursed Kanaye silently, wishing that he hadn't put the burden on him. This was a brother's job; it was his duty as a brother to take care of his younger sister—to be there for her. She couldn't take this burden alone, it should not have been given to her. But instead of being there like a good brother would have been, he had left Sasuke to the task. He was probably the last person best suited for this situation; he hadn't ever had anyone around to console him, in fact, the brother that damned well should have been there for *him* had done the opposite and killed everything he had ever cared about.

Sasuke paused to let his thoughts settle; his silence to Sakura probably wasn't helping either. He was working with trial and error here. That last comment had been the wrong way to put it; he should try and fix it.

"You're not weak, Sakura," he said then, remembering that her biggest fear was for her father to think her pathetic, "But your full potential isn't being met anymore. You were going above and beyond before, but now you are just managing things. What happens if you lose yourself on a mission? It's too risky; you could jeopardize our team if you stay like this."

She was silent for a moment, the tears having receded. That trial seemed to have gone well; it didn't look like she was upset—or at least not upset even further than she already was. She sniffed quietly.

"Does it really show?" she asked timidly and he got the feeling that she was avoiding having to look directly into his eyes—though he doubted there was enough use in them to make his gaze intimidating.

As to how to answer her question...

"Let me ask you this first, before I answer," he told her calmly, "Is it considered normal to think strange thoughts after being healed by medic nin?"

"What kinds of thoughts?" she asked him a confused frown descending upon her brow.

' Like wanting to be close to you, wanting to hold you, thinking that the skin of your neck is soft against mine,' he thought grudgingly in reply, but he wasn't about to tell her that; instead he said: "That's not important."

"Well, it is possible I suppose. My chakra being in so close contact to you, especially your head, you might be prone to feeling emotions that you might not normally feel..."she said slowly and then her eyes widened slightly, "Are you saying that during the most recent healing sessions you've been able to feel how I've been feeling? Oh, Sasuke, that never even occurred to me. I'm so sorry, the thoughts you must have been having... I can stop the healing sessions for a while, until I feel better that is. I didn't think that—"

"No; the Chuunin Exams are soon, and I need your help to regain as much of my vision as possible before then," Sasuke interjected with a firm shake of his head, "Even if you stopped the healing sessions, it wouldn't keep me from realizing how you feel. When you taught me to detect even masked signatures, I soon was able to tap into the emotional component of people remotely. Right now I can sense how you feel; when you act like everything is okay, to me that's all it is—an act. You're miserable, Sakura, and I can tell, no matter how convincing you can be, even when you smile. Don't let yourself be miserable Sakura—there is an alternative. I'm suggesting that you try it."

She didn't say anything for a long time. He didn't think that he said anything wrong, but again this was trial and error. He was not used to having to speak too much and he felt vulnerable for merely saying so much. At least he got the feeling that she was seriously considering his words—he hadn't intended on telling her that he

could sense emotions, but somehow it had happened anyways and it seemed to have turned things in his favor. He had thought that maybe the idea that he almost always knew how she felt—over all—would upset her, but as things were, the notion hadn't.

The silence drew out for a while and he began to second-guess his assumptions on whether she was further upset because she was taking so long to answer. He wasn't sure of anything in this situation, he was a foreigner to the land of emotions; he had known it well once, but that was a long time ago and now it was unfamiliar to him. He mostly warded off invasions from those lands and locked away those he could not get rid off. But there was one thing that even amid this alien territory that he was sure of, and he knew it was the right thing to voice to her.

"I don't know your father that well," he said seriously, "But I know that no matter what happens to him, he doesn't want you to lose your skill."

The words had the desired affect, as her face hardened slightly with this sobering news. Her voice was still uncertain, but Sasuke knew that she was more certain by even chancing something as this.

"I...I'll try," she whispered.

He took her hand and as she had done for many months, he did to her: he brushed his thumb over the back of her knuckles, "Thank you."

Standing outside the Hokage's office door, Sasuke waited patiently while Sakura knocked on the wooden surface, the grain of the wood standing out while he observed it with his senses. He wondered amusedly to himself how much time he and Sakura spent outside this very door, more than most people, probably. The Hokage's apprentice and Konoha's probationary criminal—he supposed it made sense that they would visit the Hokage's office more than regular people, but it was just unusual that they, two people who

would seemingly have very little to do with one another if known only for their station, would show up together.

There was a beckoning call from within the room, and Sasuke felt Sakura squeeze his hand with hers out of nervousness; though outwardly her face was calm and placid, her chakra was still laden with depression and now an additional touch of anxiety. He gave a gentle return squeeze, hoping that she would be somewhat reassured by the gesture, though there was really nothing to be nervous about to begin with. He followed her as she strode into the room, determined to keep a cheerful look on her face, a bright smile plastered there. Sasuke knew who was present already in the room before he entered it, now mostly familiar with the chakra signatures of the Hokage and her secretary, and gave an acknowledging nod to each as he came to a stop by Sakura's side.

The reason that both of them had come to see the Hokage that late morning was to discuss the matter of the rather blunt order telling her to go home. Sasuke personally had begun to wonder if the order itself had been born directly out of the fact that her father had gone missing and she felt that she would intervene and send Sakura home to be with her family during this time. Normally Sasuke would have agreed to such an assessment had Kanaye not suggested otherwise; and it was not like she was completely isolated from her family—Sakura's mother had come over a couple of times since the news to check on Sakura. The older woman had come to the same conclusion as Kanaye, having informed Sasuke of this while Sakura was in the bathroom. So he was going to be sure to do what her family thought was best for her—after all, their daughter was living with him, and he wanted to make sure they approved of him.

Sakura had decided that they would pay the Godaime a visit in order to present a reason for her to continue living with him, and that reason was him—literally. Sakura was going to demonstrate—in a manner of speaking—the progress made on his ever-improving vision. She had said that Tsunade believed that his vision would most likely never return, and to present evidence that would suggest

otherwise would not only astound the woman, but also would most likely sway her order for her departure. Sasuke, of course, was less than thrilled of being put on display for people, but he had said nothing against it, only put forth an ultimatum—he would go only if while she was there that she would discuss one other thing with the Hokage.

"Sakura, what a pleasant surprise," Tsunade greeted her pupil, and then she turned towards Sasuke, "And it is good to see you, too, Sasuke."

"Sakura-san, Sasuke-san," Shizune greeted respectfully, "It is nice to see that you have returned safely from your mission."

The Godaime Hokage nodded in agreement, "Especially considering all that happened. Actually, I was hoping to be able to talk to you about a couple things in regards to the mission, your arrival here is actually very well timed. First of all, I would like to apologize, Sasuke, about what happened at Kumogakure. Had I known about Oto's raid on Kumo, I probably would have assigned Team Seven to a different mission. As I understand it, from reading your mission reports, you came very close to being arrested."

"You could not have known," Sasuke replied, with a dismissive tone, "I myself couldn't remember the event had even happened until it was too late."

"I'm glad you understand, however, we should have been more cautious," Tsunade said gravely, "Or at least more attentive to our neighbors. The fact that an entire raid on another village escaped our information networks suggests to me that our intelligence groups need to find better sources. I also would like to apologize about the incident involving your brother, but I have to say that if you had tried to engage him at all, it would have definitely gone badly for you in regards to your criminal status."

Sasuke stiffened slightly, and kept his voice level, though it sounded rigid even to his ears, "Sakura did what was best for the mission."

He did not voice whether he felt it was in his own best interest. There was a nod, but no voiced reply in response to his statement; Sasuke wondered if the Hokage had picked up on the ambiguity of the statement, but she too said nothing further. Instead she turned to Sakura once again.

"One last thing, Sakura, before I let you tell me what you came here for. I assume that you got my message."

It was Sakura's turn to tense slightly, as the pressure on Sasuke's hand momentarily increased. Despite that slight change, there was nothing to indicate that the question had made her nervous; Sakura nodded lightly. "Actually, that is the reason why we came to see you this morning."

"Is that so?" the Hokage said with a guarded tone in her voice; Sasuke could guess what she was thinking: she had guessed that Sakura had come to request more time to stay at the Uchiha manor, but his presence when she would make such a request would have confused her.

"You wrote that I had completed my mission and that you desired I return home," Sakura said calmly with a matter-of-fact tone in her voice, "However, I believe that is farther from the truth than anything else. Now is the time where my work is the most important—to call it complete now would be like going home empty handed, when the scroll you were sent to retrieve lay right in front of you. After careful consideration and extensive research, I decided to take my chance against the four percent figure printed out by our medics while Sasuke was in the hospital—I have begun to try and restore his sight."

There was a stunned silence from both the Hokage and her secretary. Neither of them seemed to know how to react to this statement, as it was probably the last thing that they had expected. With such a small percentage of success, it was not at all surprising that they hadn't expected Sakura to take on the challenge, but then again, Sasuke mused, they shouldn't have been surprised if they

knew her as well as he thought they did. Only Sakura would have the stubbornness to try and achieve the near impossible—and besides, he had nothing further to lose anyways.

"I would have talked to you about the idea first, and mentioned it in the mission report earlier, but neither Sasuke nor I wanted to get anyone's hopes up, least of all ourselves. So we didn't tell anybody. However, I think that with the progress made so far, we can begin to hope that things might beat the odds," Sakura stated with an air of pride, "I have come here today to show you the fruits of a mere three weeks worth of attempts."

"Are you saying that Sasuke-san...can see?" Shizune asked in amazement, being the first out of the two women to recover her voice.

"...Not exactly, but he's shown...well, Sasuke, maybe it would be better if you told, them," Sakura turned to him at this point.

She seemed excited; presenting the progress they had made had evidently caused her to put her grief from her mind. He extinguished his senses and opened his eyes, blurred shades coming into view. Nothing was distinct, but he thought he had gained a little depth perception.

"There is no colour, but I am able to tell that there are many different surfaces and areas by the shades of gray I can see," he said, speaking for the first time in a little while, "Nothing is clear—I can't make anything out but blurred shapes."

There was a contemplative pause from the Hokage, and then he sensed her—rather than saw her—get up and walk across the room so that she was standing right in front of him. He could see the pale whiteness of her face, but the rest was grays around her; her white face looming forth from amid the other washes of tints was a bit eerie.

"Shizune, fetch my ophthalmoscope from my portable medical kit," Tsunade spoke without moving, "It's in the cabinet."

"Hai, Tsunade-sama," the young woman replied, and there was rummaging through what sounded like drawers, shortly.

Sasuke could feel the Hokage's examining gaze on him, even though he could not see it, with either his senses or his eyes. The gaze itself was not hostile in any way, but it had a certain superiority to it that Sasuke did not find himself liking. He did not dislike the Hokage, but he never did like the feeling of being inferior to somebody else. His posture was already straight-backed, not defiant, but in the usual way that suggested that he refused to be regarded beneath anyone. In addition to not liking the feeling of someone towering over him, he also did not like being the center of attention, which was exactly what he was right now.

He heard Shizune declare a quiet 'aha' before she came over to the Hokage, presumably with the item that she had been requested to bring. There was the quiet transaction, only noted by Sasuke through the sound of the ophthalmoscope changing hands.

"Thank you, Shizune," Tsunade said and there was the click of the ophthalmoscope being turned on.

It was like all the grays had been washed away in a single sweep of startling white—except it only happened in his one eye. The other eye seemed like things had gotten a bit darker, but other than that, there was no change. Sasuke resisted the very violent urge to blink—the light was very bright—and he could feel the moisture beginning to collect in his eyes as they slightly watered from the shock.

"This is... I'm getting a response," the Hokage murmured, her voice filled with wonder, "The iris has contracted in response to the light. Not much, but..."

The blinding whiteness passed over to the other eye, leaving the first with an annoying black patch where all the shades of gray would

have been. However, with his other eye being assaulted by the bright light, he hardly noticed the darkness in the other.

"Amazing, isn't it?" Sakura asked from somewhere on his right, sounding genuinely content with the Godaime's reaction.

"I never would have thought it possible," she replied, awe still heavy in her voice, "You are quite the miracle-worker, Sakura. Are you able to see this, Sasuke?"

"I am," he replied, assuming she was referring to the light.

"What side am I shining the light from?"

"My left."

The light moved back to the first eye, and while it was still bright, it was tolerable this time—the residual blackness making him able to resist it better. All of these questions reminded him of the days he had spent in the hospital. People asking questions about his sight, tests, and the like—the only difference was that this time he could actually give a response to what was being asked of him. He could see something now, and now his answers could be something other than: "no, there is no change".

"To the right, now," he stated in response to the question that he knew was about to be asked.

"How about now?"

The light had vanished from the vicinity; he assumed that she had moved it away or put her hand over to of the end, as he did not hear her turn it off.

"It's gone," he said plainly.

"Simply amazing," the Hokage breathed, and that time Sasuke heard the ophthalmoscope switch off, "I would like to perform a local examination with my chakra."

A local examination, those were like the ones Sakura performed, he realized—where she used her hands to work her chakra around his eyes. He hesitated for a moment, uncertain. Whenever Sakura's fingertips came to his temples, he became relaxed, despite the recent change in her chakra; her chakra through him made him think of her sometimes, and he would constantly be reminded of her. The examination using chakra was something that he had come to associate with Sakura, like he associated ramen with Naruto. The Hokage doing the same thing would be... He paused. What was the difference anyways? Why should he care? What difference did it make if Sakura or the Hokage did the examination? He gave a slow nod.

There were cool fingertips on the different and familiar points on his head, and soon the chakra of the Godaime was examining his eyes and the surrounding area. Unlike when Sakura performed the check, he did not think of the Hokage other than deciding that her chakra matched her personality. It was sharp and decisive, yet not altogether harsh. There was a kindness to it, and as he felt her chakra examining his eyes, the strange tingling sensation flowing through them, he found that he respected her more than he had initially when he had first entered the office.

The chakra receded again and the fingertips left his temples. There was a stunned silence from the Godaime; Sasuke closed his eyes, activating his senses now that she seemed finished, and noticed that Sakura was standing off to the side. The Hokage's face was impassive and Shizune looked curious.

"Well Sakura, I have no idea how you're doing it, but I must say that I'm beyond impressed," Tsunade said finally, and a relieved smile broke over Sakura's face, "I think this is definitely worth documenting; if that's alright with Sasuke."

"Sakura has already spoken with me about it," Sasuke said in response, "She may continue to stay in the Uchiha manor."

"Good; well Sakura, you never cease to amaze me," the elderly woman said with a proud smile, "You could write a doctoral thesis on some of the things you've managed to accomplish. Be sure to keep me appraised."

"I will, Tsunade-sama," Sakura said with a bow and broad smile, "Thank you for letting me do this."

"Sakura, you and I both know that there has been very little that I can't let you do," Tsunade replied with a smile, "If there was, I don't think you would be the one standing next to Sasuke in this office, and he wouldn't be here to show me miracles."

Sakura gave a nod and took Sasuke's hand, running her thumb over the back; she gave him a relieved smile and turned towards the door, but he did not move from his spot. There was a confused look on her face when she looked back at him, but he merely tilted his head to the side slightly and raised his eyebrows at her. The confusion faded as she realized why he wasn't moving, it was part of the agreement, there was something he had made her promise she would speak to the Hokage about.

"Ano...there's something else, Tsunade-sama," Sakura said quietly, almost shamefully; she was squeezing his hand a little, perhaps out of nervousness.

"What is it?"

"I would like to go on anti-depressants," Sakura said calmly, though her face betrayed every bit of disgrace and apprehension that she felt.

There was a brief pause from Tsunade and then she said: "I see. Sasuke, perhaps you had better go home; and Shizune, go down and alphabetize my textbooks please. I would like to talk to Sakura about this in private."

Sasuke nodded and dropped Sakura's hand away. And had he been able to keep his eyes open and not get sight confused with his senses, he would have attempted to give her a meaningful look, but his eyes were closed so he didn't jumble the information, so he merely walked by. In retrospect, as he walked out the door, after Shizune, the Hokage's secretary, he should have probably given her hand a reassuring squeeze. But he hadn't done either of those things—giving her a reassuring look, nor a squeeze to her hand—and it was too late now to do anything further.

A/N: Chapter 41 finished. Man, this took me like a month to complete. Well, not really, but it took me like three weeks. Depressed Sakura is really annoying to work with. I like it better when she's all kick-ass. Ah well, things will get better soon :p

As a prank on my editor, when Sakura says to Tsunade 'I would like to go on anti-depressants' I wrote 'I'm pregnant' instead. It was very amusing to watch her read this impassively, pause, look confused, then turn to me and exclaim: "WHAT? O.O" And I died laughing.

Editor's Note: Sasuke in emotional situations is like me running from the underwear aisle. LOL.

Chapter 42

A/N: I feel that today, in this spot at the beginning of the next chapter, chapter forty-two, that I should say something deep

A/N: If *Blind* were ever to become an anime (not that it ever would, lol), I've decided that the opening theme would be 'One Moment' by Tom Sigmond and the ending theme would be 'First Time' by Lifehouse. 'First Time' is like the definition of Sasuke's feelings for Sakura, and it was after watching an AMV to 'One Moment' (AMV by StaticRaven—I'd put up a link on my profile, but she got her account suspended, which makes me sad) that first got me into thinking about the possible pairing of SasuSaku. About a month and a half later, *Blind* was born—and I am possibly the most Sasuke-obsessed, SasuSaku fangirl in all of North America. XD

Chapter Forty-Two: An Overdose on Chocolate

After Sasuke left the Hokage's office, he did not proceed directly home like the Godaime had suggested, but instead took interest in another location to proceed to. He had managed to accomplish one of the things that Kanaye had suggested, and that was to get Sakura onto anti-depressants. The other primary thing was to keep her distracted, to prevent her mind from wandering back to the fate of her father. He had an idea, though once again, he felt incompetent as the person assigned to do such a task. He would just get it over with, he decided.

He paused in front of a shop to glance at the sign outside with his senses, only to discover that the sign was a flat one, not one of carved wood or intricate neon light bulbs, but judging by the smell that was wafting from the display of flowers set up nearby, he had come to a flower shop. Now, whether this was the *right* one, he didn't know, but he supposed that there was only one way to find out.

Without hesitation, or a waver in resolve, he pulled the front door open and entered the small shop. Once his mind was set on doing something, no matter how ill suited for the task he was, he would do it as quickly, efficiently, and decisively as possible.

Another week off from the pharmacy only spelled out the word boredom, in capital letters, for Ino. Business had been slow lately and they were overstaffed, resulting in too many days off to count; now this wouldn't have been such a bad thing if things hadn't been so slow for Team Ten either. Shikamaru being a jounin had only resulted in the Team being further separated, for many of the missions that he was assigned to go on, neither Chouji or her self were qualified to participate. Asuma was qualified and he too had taken absence as often as Shikamaru.

The lack of missions meant that there was more time to dedicate to finishing her medical training, but if things at the pharmacy continued as they were, she wouldn't have enough experience to graduate until she was forty-five. She shuddered at the thought—she had no intention of ever living long enough to get wrinkles. So, instead of being at the pharmacy—where she'd much rather be—she was stuck minding her mother's flower shop, with nothing but long drawn out hours of helping the few customers that trickled in through the door.

What Konoha needed was a bacterial pandemic of sorts, so that they would need to prescribe more antibiotics, Ino decided then, if a pandemic started, not only would she be working at the pharmacy, but she would probably be worked—and paid—overtime. Everything that had been going around lately was viral, and no amount of antibiotics could do anything about that. Though there was the occasional idiot who thought that antibiotics could cure their viral infection... Didn't they know that if they took antibiotics even though they did not need them, they risked creating super bugs?

Though a super bug might cause something exciting to happen in Konoha, Ino pondered, she'd probably be needed more if there were

something like that on the loose. Maybe she'd even get moved up as high as being on the research team to find something that could fight the super bug—the young, blonde, beautiful kunoichi, Yamanaka Ino, saving Konoha from a pandemic of super bugs. That even sounded lame to her ears, and it would be a very bad thing if a super bug got out anyways, she shouldn't wish for something like that. But could anyone blame her? She was bored; all that she really wanted was for something interesting to happen. Nothing of notable mention had happened since Sasuke had been brought back to Konoha, and that had been months ago.

The bell on the front door to the shop chimed in the familiar way that Ino had grown to find irritating, signaling to her that a customer had come in. She fixed what she called her "facelift smile" on her face, preparing to tolerate another customer planning on buying flowers for some occasion or loved one, but as soon as she left the counter she was struck by the notion that perhaps her desired dose of excitement hadn't just walked through the front door.

It was Sasuke.

Now, there were a number of things that just seemed wrong about this picture; the most noticeable of which were: a) he was in her mother's flower shop of all places, b) he was walking around without Sakura, c) he was making a direct beeline for her without tripping over anything. She was too surprised at his easy movements that she could do nothing but stare at him. She was certain that he would trip over the potted plants on the floor, or misjudge his direction and walk into a display of flowers, but he didn't do either. Her next concern was that he would then walk into her, and she began inwardly debating whether or not she should get out of his way so that he wouldn't crash into her, but he didn't do that either. Before she had made her choice, he came to a stop in front of her.

"Hello, Sasuke-kun," she said as normally as she could sound while being so dumbfounded, "I wasn't expecting you of all people to walk into this shop."

When he responded, he did not tilt his head towards her, but his face was positioned straight forwards, making talking with him seem that much more strange. His eyes were closed shut, so he was definitely walking around without seeing anything. She hadn't heard whether they had been able to do anything for his sight when he was in the hospital, but apparently they hadn't. And yet he had moved so nimbly across the shop that he might as well be seeing.

"Ino, you're still friends with Sakura," it was a statement, and it took her a moment to comprehend that he was seeking confirmation of that statement.

"Yeah, I am. I consider her my best friend," she replied without hesitation once she realized it was more of a question that he had voiced, "Even if we don't get to see each other as often as we used to."

"I need your help," he said calmly then.

"Help?" she echoed, *'What's going on?'*

"Sakura's family is having problems," Sasuke replied, "She's not taking it well. Her brother suggested to me that it might be a good idea for her to spend some time in the company of others, besides myself."

"So you want me to come over and spend some time with Sakura?" Ino asked, her mind clicking into place; she set aside her speculations of Sasuke as she realized her friend needed her help. That was all she really needed to understand.

Sasuke gave a nod, "This afternoon if possible."

Poor Sakura, Ino suddenly lamented, all depressed and upset with only Sasuke to try and comfort her. And while he may be drop-dead gorgeous, he was still a man, and men never understood these things perfectly. At least Sakura's brother had some sense to understand what his sister needed.

"Well, Kanaye's right. It'll be good for her to get out," Ino voiced out loud, "Because no offense, Sasuke-kun, but you're probably not very good at this. Alright. I'll come over this afternoon at two and I'll also talk to Ten Ten and Hinata and see if I can arrange a girl's night out."

"Thank you," Sasuke replied to her before turning and striding towards the door, beginning to leave as promptly and mysteriously as he had arrived. However this time as he crossed the room, Ino couldn't help but call out in warning to him as he passed by some potted plants.

"Watch out for the plants on the floor!" she said, hesitantly, but then became unsure of whether or not she should have spoken.

"I know," he said in response, walking by them, leaving them all intact.

The bell tingled again as the door closed behind him, and Ino was left to feel both confused and determined about everything that had just happened. She would go and see Sakura, right after she talked to Hinata and Ten Ten.

Sakura was at home again, and much to Sasuke's satisfaction, she was in the possession of a prescription for some anti-depressants. It seemed that she had been crying again, as her face had that certain tired look around the eyes, and there were tiny drops of moisture clinging to her eyelashes. These were the first things that he noticed when he saw her after she arrived home, and the first thing that she had done in response to his walking into the room, to see how she was after the meeting, was to fall into his arms and cling to him for a few minutes. She did not cry, nor did she seem hurt, but he knew that she had just gone and admitted something that she would have rather not have had to admit. He rubbed her back in the same manner that he had done for the past few days until she let go of him, and then followed her receding form with his senses as she walked away without a word. He knew that the prescription still needed to be filled, but already she had gone so far

for him that he decided not to press her about it. He would talk to her later, maybe after Ino had come and gone.

The rest of the morning had passed slowly, and there was a certain layer of gloom over the house. Even though Sasuke was satisfied with his progress on following Kanaye's instructions, Sakura's mood was starting affect him, and while he was a serious person almost all the time, he became more so that morning. With nothing in particular to do, he wandered around the house for the most part, sometimes wandering over to Sakura's side and wordlessly helping her with whatever household chore she had taken upon herself to do. Silence was a nice thing for him, but in this atmosphere he found it almost dispiriting, and he really wished that she would say something—to be herself again.

It was almost a relief when he sensed Ino's chakra signature come within his range and then, shortly afterwards, hear the knock on the back door. He turned his head towards Sakura, who had been stoically silent all throughout the time that they had been washing dishes, to find that she had tensed noticeably. Her fingers gripped the bowl she was holding with alarming strength, and he reached over slowly and removed the bowl from her hands before it broke. She looked at him then, seeming to remember he was there, and her face was pleading.

"Please, I don't want to have to deal with anyone else," Sakura whispered, "Can you get the door?"

Setting the bowl down on the counter, he gave a slow nod and left the kitchen, turning down the hall that led to the back door. As he went, he noticed that Sakura's signature had clandestinely crept away from the kitchen and then make its way to their bedroom. She was doing better at keeping her emotions at bay so far that day, but it would not do to have her hiding in the house, refusing to come out. He would get Ino to deal with this, he thought, as she said: he probably wasn't very good at this kind of thing. And no, he wasn't.

When he opened the door, Ino was standing patiently on the other side, a bag slung over her shoulder and a determined look on her face, "Hey, Sasuke-kun, it's me."

Apparently she still hadn't figured out that he didn't need her to announce herself any longer, as he could tell whom she was without having to ask first. Like Naruto, she most likely was confused about how he managed to get around without Sakura; she was still treating him like he was completely blind.

"Come in," he said absently, moving out of her way so that she could enter.

"Where's Sakura?" the young woman asked while she kicked off her shoes and then very meticulously set them to the side of the room where he wouldn't accidentally trip on them.

"Inside," he replied, and then motioned for her to follow, "Come with me."

He led her as far as the living room and then instructed her to wait while he retrieved Sakura. He walked towards the bedroom and found that she had closed the door behind her after she had hidden herself away. He opened the door and entered the room, not bothering to close the door behind him as he stood in the doorway observing her. Sakura was sitting on the bed, hunched over and hugging her legs, a sad expression on her face, but she looked alert. Seeing her like that made him feel lost again, unsure of what to do about her sudden guarded state, but glad that Ino was there and that Sakura had agreed to go on anti-depressants. She looked up at him when he entered, but did not move other than to tilt her head slightly upwards to get a better look at him.

"Who was it?" she asked quietly, her voice astonishingly unwavering.

"It's Ino," he replied, holding the door pointedly open, "She wants to see you."

A look of panic flashed across her face. "Oh gods, Sasuke," she whispered, her voice gaining a slight tremble, "Can't you tell her that I'm not feeling well or something?"

"That's why she's here," he replied patiently, and he felt more like he was coaxing a frightened animal than his teammate and close friend.

A horrified look came on her face then. "She doesn't know, does she?" Sakura asked, wiping her eyes as a couple of tears, which she had evidently been holding back, escaped. She was trying to regain her composure, but it wasn't working too well as he watched her hands begin to shake. She was starting to fall apart in front of him, "She doesn't know... about how I am right now?"

"I don't know," he crossed the room then, and gently took hold of her wrists, stopping her from continuing to wipe her tears away, "Don't do that. Pretending isn't going to help anything."

She gave him a serious look, her face hardening for a moment, a look that bordered on the edge of cold anger, "Coming from you, that sounds a bit hypocritical."

Her retort was sharp and her voice icy, but Sasuke didn't outwardly show how the comment had affected him. He knew she was right, he had never allowed his emotions to show before; he had always kept his deepest pains hidden away from anyone—who was he to tell her not to pretend about how she felt?

"When you have no one alive that you trust, it's the only thing you can do," he replied calmly, knowing that out of her anger and grief that she sounded harsher than she had meant to.

His face became sorrowful and she turned away, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"You have people you can trust, Sakura," he told her, lowering her wrists to her lap before he let go of them, "so trust them."

"What about now, Sasuke?" she asked quietly, not looking at him, "Do you have people you trust?"

"I trust you," he replied, stressing the 'you' slightly.

She nodded, but didn't say anything further. He longed for his eyesight then, he wished he could look into her brilliant green eyes and tell her then that he trusted her—trusted her enough not to try not to pretend. How many secrets had he shown her already? She had seen him grieve his darkest secrets, yet why did he still try to be strong? Why did he still try to pretend? He wished that he had his full sight then, so that he could look at her and convey his thoughts to her, so that maybe they could trust each other just a little more.

"Sakura?"

Sasuke gave a small start as Ino appeared in the doorway. Too lost in his thoughts again, he had ceased to pay attention to his surroundings and failed to notice that Ino was on the move. He should have known that Ino would lose patience sooner rather than later. The kunoichi stood in the doorway, looking at the both of them, Sasuke standing in front of Sakura, Sakura sitting on the bed, tears wet on her face. Ino's face transformed into one of deep concern.

"Oh, Sakura, you look terrible!" Ino declared in dismay, and then without another word, she marched across the room and took Sakura's hands, pulling her to her feet, "Come, you need to tell me everything."

With that, she marched Sakura from the room, towing her by the hand. Sasuke stood there for a moment in surprise, amazed more by Ino's brashness rather than the intrusion into the room. He had been so careful around Sakura, and Ino's approach had completely surprised him, seeming the complete opposite of what he knew about dealing with this sort of thing. He moved to follow, when he remembered the futon in the corner of the room. Sakura had specifically instructed Naruto not to tell anyone that they were sharing the same room, especially Ino; he wondered if Ino had come

across that fact by herself now that she had seen their bedroom. He would see.

He walked out of the room and went to the living room, and saw that Ino was sitting Sakura down on the couch. Crossing his arms casually across his chest, Sasuke leaned against the wall and observed, more or less because he figured that he was supposed to be there if he had no where else to be.

"I know exactly what you need," Ino had just declared and promptly began rummaging around her in bag; after a moment she procured rather flat rectangular object that Sasuke wasn't quite able to make out with his senses at first, "Chocolate."

It was then that Sakura broke out into what looked like a reluctant smile, but it was a smile nonetheless. This was the closest thing that Sakura had shown to a true smile in days, and it relieved Sasuke to see that she wore a faint one now on her face as she unwrapped the bar of chocolate. It had been a good idea to pick Ino to spend time with Sakura, he thought to himself.

"Oi, Sasuke-kun! Don't look so comfortable where you're standing. Get lost," Ino ordered pushily, waving him off, "Find somewhere else to hang out for a while."

He raised his eyebrows at her, and when she gave him a pointed glare he straightened up, and took a few steps towards the exit. He cast Ino and Sakura another confused look; was he really being thrown from his own house? It was when Ino waved him off with a very irritated look that he realized that she was serious. He quickly cleared out of the room, knowing that she would become very irritating if she didn't get her way—it seemed that that aspect of her had never changed. He supposed that he could leave for a while, there were lots of things he could do, but he supposed that that day was as good as any to start preparation for the Chuunin Exam.

Sakura watched Sasuke's retreating back as he left the room, and presumably the house as well. Under different circumstances she might've wondered how he was feeling about being evicted from his own household, perhaps even been amused by the notion, but right now her mind was drawing a very long blank—if one were to examine her brain activity on a heart monitor, it would be flat-lining, even Inner Sakura was silent; she was completely numb, in a semi-state of shock, without the horrible shock-provoking incident. The flat-line had a little blip in it, as her mind made a momentary note of the taste of chocolate in her mouth, but then it went flat again.

Ino brought her somewhat aback to the real world by snapping her fingers in front of her face. She turned her head towards her best friend and tried to smile in an apologetic manner, but even she knew that she was probably failing dismally.

"Hey, forehead-girl, this isn't like you at all," Ino said with a sympathetic look on her face, "You look a mess; what on earth have I missed?"

Sakura let out a sigh and closed her eyes for three seconds, counting each second in her head before she opened them again. "Ino...my father is...he's been listed as MIA," Sakura said, as unwaveringly as she could.

Her best friend gave a slow nod in understanding, but she looked shocked by the notion as well. Sasuke hadn't told Ino, evidently, for which she was somewhat thankful. He was a reserved person and minded his own business; he was levelheaded and thought things through, unlike her, who was just falling to pieces.

"When did you find out?" Ino asked kindly, and Sakura wished that she wouldn't.

"Last week," she replied, her will beginning to slip as tears formed in her eyes again, and then she cried out: "Oh, Ino, I can't stop thinking about what a horrible daughter I've been and how selfish a person I am."

She broke down and started to cry again for the second time that day, her sobs building up in her chest. Ino shoved another chocolate bar in her face and she took it gratefully, her hands shaking as she opened the wrapper. She could barely see through her tears. There was something about telling your problems to your friends that made things feel worse and better at the same time. She did not want to burden Ino with her sorrows any more than she did with Sasuke, but Ino had that dominating air that left Sakura feeling backed against a corner and unable to get out of telling her. In all honesty, Sakura was glad that Ino was like that.

"I keep thinking about all the times I could have been better to him," Sakura choked, nibbling on the corner of the chocolate bar, "All those times that he just wanted to do something with this daughter and I just refused. Would it have killed me to train with my father instead of meeting Naruto for ramen? Whatever happened to the little girl who would grow excited at the mere suggestion of going out and spending time with her father? I love my dad, I really do, and what did I ever do to show it?"

"Hey, Sakura...don't sound like that," Ino said gently, "I know your dad could be a total pain in the ass sometimes—I remember it used to vex me too when I came over, but you know what? Your dad loved you, and he knew you cared about him too. So whether or not he's still alive, or if he's looking down on us now—or looking up at us, you never know—" Sakura gave a small laugh at this "—that's all that matters: that he knew."

"...I...I know," whispered Sakura, her hands clasped around the remaining chocolate in the wrapper, "Regrets are horrible, because more often than not, you never get a second chance to fix them. I seem to have so many regrets, and I hate it. Why can't I do anything right?"

"Sakura, look at all the mistakes you've made and then look at all the right things you've done, look at all the people who are alive thanks to you. Look at Sasuke—he's walking around like he's not blind at all, and I don't think anyone could have done what you have for him,"

Ino said with exasperation, "Once upon a time I would have been jealous of you, maybe even spite you for it, but now I can't help but acknowledge how talented you are. So don't tell me that you can't do anything right, because guess how bad that makes me look when you've already done so many things that I never could."

"I'm being selfish again, aren't I?" Sakura asked, her eyes dropping to her lap.

"No, you're being stupid," Ino corrected sternly, "Now, it seems that the only way to get this through to you is if we do things like this. Repeat after me: I, Haruno Sakura..."

Mystified, Sakura looked up at her best friend, but repeated after her anyways, "I, Haruno Sakura..."

"...will stop thinking like this, cheer up and stop moping about..." Ino directed.

"...will stop thinking like this, cheer up and stop moping about..." Sakura recited afterwards.

"...finish my chocolate, and go have a good time with my best friend," Ino finished.

Sakura's lip twitched in appreciation, "...finish my chocolate, and go have a good time with my best friend."

"Good, now finish your chocolate and let's go."

Sakura stuffed the rest of the chocolate in her mouth and then after some considerable difficulty with chewing and swallowing, she asked: "Where are we going?"

"Shopping of course," Ino replied promptly, "and then we'll have lunch at a nice café and catch up, okay? Finished the chocolate? Okay, let's go."

Given to time to respond to any of the things Ino had said, Sakura was hauled to her feet and abruptly dragged away.

When Sasuke found himself thrown from his own house, he did not leave as Ino had directed him to do, and instead sat on the roof of the house, waiting until the two girls were done discussing whatever girls talked about in times of crisis. It wasn't until he could not detect their chakra signatures in range anymore before he finally removed himself from his seat on the old shingles.

He had been sitting there, monitoring the situation for any change in Sakura's signature, which there hadn't been any. Nothing had significantly changed other than the fact that Sakura seemed to have calmed down quite a bit. Odd words had drifted up to him, caught by his sensitive hearing, but only when the breeze was still and quiet. But now that the two of them had gone out to do who knew whatever what, he jumped off the roof and landed nimbly on the lawn below. He smirked satisfactorily at himself; this session of trial and error had turned out quite nicely, hopefully when Sakura returned she would consciously be in a better mood even if her chakra signature hadn't improved at all.

He crawled up onto the veranda and walked the length of it, coming to a stop only in front of the one room that he had avoided like the plague for years. He put his hand on the handle for a few seconds and then pushed the door open; he seemed to be paying more visits to this room than he normally would have liked. He blocked out all thoughts from his mind and then crossed the room, but avoiding walking through the center. On the other side of a room, was an old weapons cabinet where the family used to keep their weapons.

It was rather nondescript, or at least Sasuke considered the decorative trimmings not worth his attention. He grabbed the brass knobs that opened the upper half of the cabinet—the bottom half consisted of drawers—feeling the tarnish dirtying his fingertips, but he didn't really care. What lay within the cabinet held his attention; shuriken lay out on silk display cases, while unique kunai knives

were given cushions to rest upon. There was an empty cushion where the kunai, which had his father's name engraved into it, belonged. He paused long enough to consider returning it to its place, but for some reason, he decided to hang onto it. Of course he would never use it in a fight—there was a chance he would lose it then—but perhaps it could serve some other purpose.

His gaze then shifted to the bottom shelf of the cabinet—the bottom of the upper half and the top of the shelves—where there lay five long katana.

He reached out and picked up the first one, which also appeared to be the oldest one of the five. It was a family heirloom and he remembered one time he had cut himself on the blade when he had been playing with the weapons, which he wasn't allowed to do. The cut had been so deep that he had needed stitches, and his parents had been so upset with him afterwards. He smirked slightly at the memory and weighed the weapon carefully in his hand. It was obvious that it was old, for the craftsmanship—while good for its time—was poor in comparison to that of the newer made weapons. The weight was slightly favoured in the blade, throwing off the balance of the weapon. He was surprised how easily he noticed this trait, as when in Otogakure, he had difficulty selecting the best blade from the weapon's cache. Now, he could pick out the flaw so easily, and he supposed was a result of relying on his other senses for so long. Carefully he set it down again and picked up the second katana.

This one was a newer one and one that he never recalled seeing before. This katana handled fairly well in his hand, but there was a great deal of damage done to the blade. The steel was slightly nicked, he realized as he slowly ran his fingers over the edge; he was being very careful not to cut himself, but soon he realized that it was unlikely that that he would be able to if he tried. That blade had seen a lot of damage and nobody had bothered to sharpen it since it was last used. He could sharpen it himself, but it would be a waste of time if he could use one of the remaining three lying in the case. He set the second katana down, and turned to the third.

He quickly decided against the third after he lifted it. It too was well worn and the fixture between the blade and the handle was loose. He set the katana down relatively quickly, wondering why his parents bothered keeping such a thing—it was even slightly dirty; there was some grit on the blade near the handle. He tried rubbing it off, but to no avail; he let it be. Had he had his sight, he would have been able to see that it was not grit at all, but in fact the emblazonment of a name written onto the katana: Uchiha Mikoto.

The fourth katana was as good as perfect, and the fifth one had a slight flaw, so he took up the fourth again. It fitted nicely in his hand and was in good condition; while none of these could compare to the sword, Kusanagi, which he had used, this one was a lot nicer than the normal ordinary katana he had used in Oto. Now all he needed was sheath for it; he found one in the drawers below, and satisfied with his finds, looked around for something he could use to fasten it to himself. The purple rope that was part of Oto's garb had sufficed nicely, holding the katana firmly within arm's reach—but there was no way that he was going to wear anything remotely similar to that ridiculous uniform ever again.

He eventually settled for a simple sort of belt, which held the scabbard securely, but made drawing the katana easy enough. He closed the cabinet and left the room, avoiding the center of the floor again, his hand resting on the handle of the blade. It had been how long since he had last used his katana? Six months? He wondered if Kakashi knew anyone who was skilled with a katana and would be willing to train him professionally. He closed the door behind him and then took the roof again, taking the quickest and most direct way to the Academy.

"What's wrong with you Sakura? You didn't buy *anything* on this shopping trip, and I bought tons of stuff!" Ino complained taking a seat at a round table in front of a café, dumping her half dozen shopping bags on the ground by her feet, "You make me feel terrible and materialistic."

Sakura smiled and took a seat opposite her best friend, her own arms bare except for her purse which Ino had made her grab, "I'm sorry Ino, I just got back from a mission last week and I don't want to waste all the pay I got right away. Maybe next time I'll get something. But I don't really *need* anything, you know?"

"What kind of girl are you, Sakura?" Ino asked, flagging down a waiter by waving her arm at a strapping young man with a cloth.

"One that doesn't need things," Sakura replied, "I'm perfectly happy with what I have."

Ino, who had been eying the waiter flirtatiously, snapped her head towards her pink-haired companion, "Oi! If that were true, then I wouldn't have had to shove two bars of chocolate down your throat earlier this afternoon."

Sakura's face fell, "I...guess."

"A lemonade and a large chocolate milkshake," Ino told the waiter before Sakura could order anything, once the waiter had left, she looked at the girl across the table from her again, "Let's not talk about that. Tell me how you've been. How's Sasuke's rehab going?"

"It's gone exceptionally well, actually," Sakura replied, but then paused contemplatively. Should she tell Ino that she was trying to restore Sasuke's sight? Maybe not yet, after all while the improvements were phenomenal, Ino was as much of a blabbermouth as Naruto, if not more so, "He's made developments on his own, and I've helped as best as I can. It's been a different experience altogether, living with him."

"I'm surprised you've lasted so long with out jumping him," Ino teased, a large grin on her face; Sakura felt herself go red.

"D-Don't talk like that, Ino" Sakura stammered, caught quite off guard, "I'm the one living in his house; I don't want to betray the trust we have established. We're just friends."

"Man, how can you stand living like that? You sleep in the same room for crying out loud, you must at least be tempted," Ino said loudly and Sakura looked at her blonde friend in alarm, when had she discovered this? "I'm not blind you know—er, no pun intended—but I saw a futon in the same room as Sasuke's. You can't tell me that it's just for decoration."

"Yes well..." Sakura wasn't quite sure how to respond to this.

"But even though you've resisted whatever urges you've had to jump him—"

"Ino, I haven't had—" Sakura started, blushing harder.

"—haven't you at least gotten him to fall for you yet?"

Sakura, whose face was the very image of objection, then grinned and burst out laughing. It was Ino's turn to be stunned as she watched her friend laugh continuously for a few moments. She was wiping tears of laughter from her eyes as the waiter set down the drinks in front of them, glancing once at Sakura and then giving a friendly smile to Ino. Ino however was too stunned to return a flirtatious look to the waiter.

"I'm sorry, but what've I missed?" Ino asked, looking utterly bewildered.

"Ino, you do realize we're talking about Uchiha *Sasuke* right?" Sakura asked, before taking a long sip from the milkshake Ino had ordered for her.

"Yes, I realize, and you know what? He's still a man, he's still human," Ino said crossing her arms.

"Sometimes, though, I wonder..." Sakura muttered, stirring the straw around idly, her smile fading slightly, "And what are you saying anyways? I thought Sasuke and I together is one of the last things that you wanted."

"Yeah well...the fight that we had when Sasuke was first brought in really got me thinking," Ino replied, her voice sobering, "I thought a lot about the things you said."

"Oh, Ino, please forget anything I said...I was angry," Sakura said guiltily; she couldn't quite remember the details of the fights they had back when everything was happening, but she remembered that a lot of them were unpleasant and rude.

"You were right, though, about a lot of things, about my feelings for Sasuke, and my interest in Shikamaru," Ino said with a shake of her head, "So I don't mind about you and Sasuke so much anymore. But don't change the topic, you've made me go off on tangent! Sasuke's human too, and that means that he's as capable of loving just as anyone else is."

"He's not interested, really, Ino," Sakura said shaking her head.

"Does he know how you feel about him?" Ino narrowed her eyes.

"Yes he does, and he hasn't acted on that, so please Ino, leave this alone," Sakura said pleadingly, "You know it's ridiculous anyways; Sasuke's too stubborn to let himself love anyone right now."

"Maybe you think that way because you've thought it was ridiculous, and therefore you've missed anything that could prove you otherwise," Ino said out of her own stubbornness, slamming her hand down on the table, "There's no way that he could live with you so long and not develop feelings for you."

Sakura was quiet for a while, her mind traveling back to the Uchiha manor and over the past few months that she had spent with Sasuke. She remembered when she opened Itachi's room, and woke to find Sasuke with his arms around her, clinging to her like she would fade away if he didn't hold on so tightly; there was the time when he asked her if she hated him, and how he wiped away her tears; there was when he said that he wanted to know what she looked like, and he held her face in his hands, tracing each feature

with gentleness. And what about when they were on the mission? When he had carried her all the way to the inn after they had been attacked, refusing to let go of her until he knew she was all right; or the evening that they spent in the teahouse, singing softly to her the song that he said he had stuck in his head—her song; or when he had another nightmare and she woke to find him sitting on the floor in her room in Kumogakure...

"Sometimes...I think he does..." Sakura said slowly, and with a saddened sigh, "But other times I don't know. I'm just afraid to make too much of those moments, in case I'm wrong—I don't want to get too hopeful, Ino. I'm happy just living with him, helping him, being near him...that's enough for me."

"That's no way of living, forehead girl," Ino retorted; Sakura inwardly sighed—she knew Ino wasn't going to give it a rest any time soon, not unless there was something else that she would be just as interested in talking about.

"Look, Ino, enough about me, drink your lemonade—the ice is going to melt," Sakura said patiently, "How have *you* been? What have you been up to?"

"You're trying to change the topic," the blue-eyed girl accused, frowning.

"Yes, I am...I'll think about what you said, I promise, it's just I can't talk about this anymore without thinking about it first, okay?" Sakura said imploringly, "Now, what have you been up to?"

Ino sighed, "As stubborn as ever, I see. Fine. But don't think I'll let this go that easily."

Knowing Ino, she would definitely attack this later, but Sakura only nodded and sipped her chocolate milkshake waiting for Ino to answer the questions put forth. Once she started talking about herself, she would soon forget any earlier conversation.

"Well things have been pretty boring for my team because what with Shikamaru now being a Jounin and all, he and Asuma are always away on missions and whatnot and Chouji and I are left behind because we're just Chuunin," Ino said with a pout, finally taking a sip of her own lemonade, "And then I've been trying to subtly hint to Shikamaru that I'm interested in him, but he seems to be missing the point entirely."

Sakura raised her eyebrows slightly. If Ino was being subtle, that meant that her hints were only just short of saying 'I love you' outright. If Shikamaru hadn't been picking up on the hints, it was more likely that he was ignoring her point blank.

"Of course maybe it's because he's not around me enough, ever since he's been put on the committee that helps organize the Chuunin Exam, he's especially busy this past July and I expect he will be in December too," Ino said with an air of lamentation, "I'm beginning to wonder if I should throw tradition out the window and ask him out myself."

Sakura smiled slightly, "Since when have you ever been one to let tradition hold you down?"

"You know what? You're right, I'll ask him out myself," Ino said decisively, slamming her fist into her palm, "But isn't that just like a man, to be so oblivious to a woman?"

"Mmm-hmm," Sakura hummed in automatic response, not really paying attention, "Men are so ignorant..."

"Hey! But of course he's going to be ignorant if he you don't let him know how you feel!" Ino insisted, flashing a disapproving glare at the pink-haired kunoichi.

Well, that was fast, Sakura noted; she hadn't been distracted for as long as she had hoped, "I told you already though...he knows how I feel about him. He asked me directly if I loved him, and of course I told him the truth."

"He asked you?" Ino seemed just as excited about this tasty bit of news as if Sasuke had asked her herself, "Sakura, how can you be so dense?! That clearly means that he's interested in you, why else would he ask?"

"Actually Ino, the circumstances under which he asked me are quite complicated and I don't think that he ever intended it to sound like he was interested in me," Sakura corrected patiently as her mind flashed back to a warm day in early August, her father having just left the Uchiha household—probably to go on the fateful mission that he was currently declared MIA from.

"Do you hate me?" ... "No. I don't hate you." ... "Do you still? –Love me, that is." ... "You know, that's the reason why I can't hate you. It's because I love you."

"Hellooo—o! Ino to Sakura!" Ino snapped her fingers in front of her face.

"What?" Sakura snapped rather quickly from her reverie.

"I *said* that even if he didn't mean it to sound that way, the very fact that he asked means something, doesn't it?" Ino said matching Sakura's green eyes with her startling blue ones, "Doesn't it?"

Sakura didn't say anything right away. Maybe it did mean something, she wasn't sure, but she was too afraid to make the wrong guesses, to assume wrong. Things were fine the way things were, she didn't need to change them, she didn't need to take any unnecessary steps over the line. She shook her head at Ino.

"Thanks for everything, Ino, but really, I can manage my relationship with Sasuke as it is," Sakura said with a sincere smile, she really was touched by her friend's enthusiasm.

"What relationship?" Ino remarked sarcastically, but the disapproving frown from her best friend made her sigh, "Alright, alright. But your dream is right within reach, just sleeping four meters from you each

night, and I can't believe you're not going to try and seize that chance."

Sakura didn't say anything to that, not voicing that actually her dream was lying right next to her every night, holding onto her through her grief as she held onto him through his nightmarish dreams. But she wasn't going to cross that line, he had to cross it first, because she knew that she was as close as she could get to her dream without touching it, and she was not about to distance herself from that from one mistake on her part.

A/N: For Christmas my editor got me the Naruto Manga, books twenty-five and twenty-six. She couldn't have gotten me a better set of books; perfect for research on Sasuke's past and perfect for putting me into a huge bout of angst. Thank you Muffin-moto! (flying tackle glomps)

And upon reading those, I realized that the Uchiha Manor/Sasuke's house has two stories on it, not just one. D'oh. (headwalls)

IMPORTANT NOTICE: Again, I'm going to be take a three week break. But this one should be the last one before I start updating every two weeks again. My next planned update day is **April 30th, 2008** . Sorry for doing this to you guys again. I hate it myself, but I still have my exams to study for, even if all my assignments are out of the way.

Chapter 43

A/N: For winter vacation I went on a cruise and stayed in Miami for one night. You know it says something about the temperature of the air conditioning when I had to sleep with my winter jacket from Canada draped over me all night. Brr! Miami is cold! I know this sounds random, but when I initially wrote this author's note, it was just after we returned from Miami, so...yeah. I wrote this a long time ago :p

Just like to wish a Happy Birthday to Chibi-esque whose birthday is today! :3

EDIT (05/01/08): Someone mentioned that Konan seems to be much older than Itachi...and yeah, that did cross my mind. But in Blind, Itachi's 22, and I'm going to give Konan maximum seven years older than him, though personally I envision it more as four. :p This is a bit of a stretch...but well, for once I'm calling in my artistic license...or fanfiction license? IDK. :p And I know that ItaKonan isn't all that popular out there, but it does play it's role in the plot when (censored for spoilers) happens to (name censored out for spoilerish reasons) later. (nods) I'm sorry I'm not being all that clear, but you should know by now that I'm like that ;)

Chapter Forty-Three: Walking Around with Your Eyes Closed

The grounds outside the Konoha Ninja Academy were empty, classes not yet having been dismissed, and Sasuke stood alone outside, leaning against a tree. It had been three and a half years since he'd last been here, and that had only been in passing when he had crossed the grounds making his way to the front gate to leave the village for good. In comparison to back then, things didn't seem to have changed much in the way of the Academy grounds.

The building looked the same, the trees hadn't grown all that much bigger and the swing was still here, swaying slightly in the wind.

He remembered the day that he had entered the Academy, already the instructors had been comparing him to Itachi then and they expected him to be as good as Itachi had been. He was used to being in Itachi's shadow all the time, but even though he had maintained the top scores in the class he knew that in skill, he was not nearly as good as Itachi had been. And then after the clan had been killed...

His senses were analyzing the swing rocking slowly in front of him; the grain of the wood was worn so that there were no long splinters in it, but a smooth surface created by hundreds of children swinging on it. He noted how the rope was slightly frayed from weather damage, but still looked sturdy and would probably not have to be replaced for a number of years yet. He remembered on the day of his graduation from the Academy, he had seen Naruto sitting dejectedly alone, the sole student that hadn't graduated, and thinking to himself that there were others like him who were completely alone.

He too had been alone on that day. Everyone else had their parents standing nearby, standing over their children proudly, and telling them that they were so happy for them. Sasuke, however, had had nobody. He had quietly departed, slipping away from the crowds after the ceremonies and formalities had been dealt with, he had no need to stick around; his only thoughts were that he had not graduated quickly enough—that his schooling had eaten up too much of his time. He had been in such a hurry to graduate, and he would need to train for the next step: becoming Chuunin.

It was funny now again he found himself at this place in search of that which would help him achieve the next step. He was probably jounin level, but here he was still ranked Genin and still waiting to become a Chuunin. And now? He wanted to become a Chuunin, yes, he wanted to get it over with, but he wasn't so desperately in a hurry. Time had taught him that hastiness did not pay; he was still in

a hurry to kill Itachi, before his brother could find and kill Sakura, but he was cautious now.

There was a sudden uplifting in most of the chakra signatures within the building, and slowly they began to leave the organized rows that they had been arranged into. Classes were over, Sasuke realized and he straightened up from his leaning position, starting to cross the grounds as students began spilling out of the front doors. Many of them cast him strange looks as he passed them in the entry way; how odd it must look to see a young man, who clearly was too old to attend the Academy, walk through the doors, his eyes shut. He ignored them and pushed his way past the group of leaving student; the crowd thinned as the bulk of the students had cleared out. The only few left were those who were in no hurry and those who were loitering around, waiting for their friends. They, too, stared at him as he approached, and he caught snatches of their whispers, one particular trio caught his attention more than the others.

"Look, there's a scratch on his headband!" whispered one excitedly.

"What? Do you think that means he's a missing nin? What's he doing here?" whispered the girl of the group of them.

"Nah, he can't be, otherwise he'd have all of Konoha on him," replied the third, also in a low voice; the three of them watched him as he passed by their position in the hallway, "I wonder how he's walking around with his eyes shut like that."

"I dunno, maybe he—"

"Look!" whispered the girl excitedly, "Isn't that the emblem of the Uchiha clan on his shirt?"

"Yes, it is! I recognize it from our textbooks!" the third boy said, sounding awed, "I heard that all the Uchiha were killed though!"

"Don't be stupid," hissed the first boy, "There were two survivors—don't you pay attention in history class?"

"Yeah, but the last I heard the two surviving Uchiha brothers were both missing nin," piped the girl.

"What? It didn't say that in our textbook."

"I know, my dad's in ANBU; he told me when I was studying for our history final three months ago," the girl quipped, "Both Uchiha brothers left the village."

"That can't be true, or he'd have your dad chasing him right now," argued the third.

"Or maybe he's not really an Uchiha," suggested the first.

At this last comment, Sasuke had heard enough. He stopped where he was, opening his eyes and shutting down his senses. The three of them were definitely out of normal earshot, but that didn't stop him from turning towards their seriously distorted forms and giving them the most powerful glare he could muster. The three of them were instantly silent and the girl's form stepped behind that of the first boy, making them, in Sasuke's eyes, one large blob. Satisfied that they would be silent for now, he turned back towards the direction he had been traveling, just as a familiar chakra signature rounded the corner.

"Uchiha Sasuke?"

Sasuke closed his eyes and activated his senses, observing for the first time the face of his Academy opponent from months ago.

"Hyuuga Ikane," Sasuke greeted neutrally, and the boy looked momentarily surprised by his ability to recognize him immediately.

He was rather short, probably as tall as Naruto had been when they were genin, and held himself with a classic Hyuuga holier-than-thou attitude. His hair was short and messed up slightly in what he considered something stylish—Sasuke could tell just by looking at the boy that he was probably the most popular boy in his class,

because Sasuke himself had experienced it himself when he was at the Academy. The only difference here being that this boy seemed to revel in it, whereas Sasuke tried to shirk the status from his shoulders. Other than narrowed eyes that were distinctly almond-shaped, he had no outstanding facial features that were worth noting.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, not sounding rude, but he was being rather straightforward.

"I am looking for one of the instructors, preferably Umino Iruka," Sasuke replied honestly, perhaps the boy could be of some assistance while he was here.

"I just came from a class with Iruka-sensei. You'll be able to find him down the hall around the left corner and three doors down," Ikane directed, making vague gestures as he spoke, and then seemed to remember that the person he was talking to was blind, "Er...I can take you there."

"That won't be necessary," Sasuke said and after giving the boy a polite parting nod, he strode off in the direction that the young Hyuuga prodigy had indicated.

Hyuuga Ikane did not move from the spot where he was rooted for a while, giving Sasuke's back a quizzical stare, and Sasuke smirked slightly to himself at the boy's expression. He did not budge at all until the three children from early ran up to him and began excitedly interrogating him.

"Ikane-kun, do you know that guy?" the girl asked instantly.

"Yeah, I do," he replied, sounding a somewhat distant, "He's really something else...for a blind guy."

"He's blind?" asked the first boy, "Could have fooled me."

"Who is he anyways?" asked the third.

"He's Uchiha Sasuke."

The remarks of awe and surprise were lost when Sasuke turned left at the corner and proceeded down the next hallway, putting the children from his mind. The hallways were almost just as he remembered except perhaps seeming just a bit smaller to him now, just as his own house had been when he first moved back in with Sakura. He hadn't been within these halls since he had graduated, and he couldn't recall seeing Umino Iruka much after that day either; he had seen him on occasion when he was in the Hokage's office the same time that Team Seven was receiving genin missions, in passing during the celebrations that were the forerunners for the Chuunin Exam, and at the Sandaime Hokage's funeral. Iruka was a decent sort and he didn't think that there would be any problems in regards to the fact that he was a traitor; after all, Naruto had said that he thought of Iruka as a father, and none of the others had treated Naruto so kindly.

The reason he sought Iruka out to find a katana instructor, wasn't because he thought that Iruka used one, but because he probably knew most of the other instructors that would be able to refine his skill. Most of what Sasuke had learned had been self-taught—or rather, he had modified what he had he had copied from self-taught katana wielders at Otogakure. To be honest, while his methods worked to get the jobs he was assigned done, it was far from as efficient as he knew it could be, and with his current skill in katana arte, he knew that if he came against an opponent in the Chuunin Exam who knew what they were doing, he would most likely lose.

The chances of coming up against a professional katana wielder was not much of a concern in the way of victory, because he could always make up for his blunders by using taijutsu, ninjutsu, or genjutsu. But victory wasn't the most important thing in the Chuunin Exam, he knew that, to come out as the champion of the Exam meant very little. The purpose of the finals was to show off the skills of those who had made it that far; feudal lords and wealthy estate owners seeking shinobi for hire and representatives of other villages

would be there to see what kind of shinobi had been produced. The more impressively the match was executed, the higher chance that one would be hired, and the only value that victory had was so that one would get another chance to show off one's skill in the match that followed.

All his skills needed to be perfect; in ninjutsu there were no issues, taijutsu was fine, and he was pretty good at genjutsu even if it wasn't his specialty. Even if he did superb in each match using a bit from each technique, his poor and flawed katana skill would lose him points, and that would lower his chance for hire. Increased chance of hire meant more hours of work, and more hours of work was equivalent to that of community service in Sasuke's eyes. The more he was hired, the sooner he could be done with the number of hours he owed Konoha. He had to win the matches of the final exams, he needed to display his skill; there was another reason too, not only did he want to be the most sought after shinobi in order to work off his hours, but he also was determined to restore the glory to the name of the Uchiha Clan, even if he and Itachi were the only ones left.

The room that Hyuuga Ikane had directed him to, stood before him now, and there were still two remaining signatures in the room from when class was dismissed; the one he assumed was Iruka's as he had never had a chance to acquaint himself with the unique atmosphere of Iruka's chakra. The other signature, however, was one he had been in the presence of before, and after a moment's thought over who it was he ventured a guess that it was Mitarashi Anko. Raising his hand he knocked sharply on the door, rapping only twice and only after he heard the beckoning call from within did he open the door.

Umino Iruka was sitting at his desk at the front of the room, and he was looking over at the door as Sasuke entered. The other person, who was indeed Anko, was leaning against the edge of the desk, a sheet of paper in hand, and she too had looked over at him at his entrance. Iruka straightened up from his work in greeting, shifting in

his chair slightly so he could get a better look at him from his position at his desk.

"Hey, hey! Well, if it isn't Sasuke," Iruka said brightly, a smile on his face, "I'd heard you'd come back, but I wasn't sure if it was a rumor or not. Welcome back."

"Thank you," Sasuke mumbled awkwardly. He knew that Iruka wasn't a bad sort, but he wasn't expecting such a welcome from his old teacher, who didn't seem perturbed by the whole three years of defection.

Sasuke studied him thoughtfully with his senses; the man hadn't changed much since he had been gone—he looked almost exactly the same as he had three years ago. There were subtle changes, though, like there was the formation of crowfeet around his eyes, and the smile lines around his mouth didn't quite fade when his smile did. And despite these changes that made him look older, Sasuke couldn't see the large scar across the bridge of Iruka's nose with his senses, taking years off the man's appearance.

"Heya, Uchiha, we seem to be running into each other a lot, wouldn'tcha say?" Anko said with her characteristic mischievous smirk decorating her lips.

He nodded once in return and then took notice of the large stack of paper on Iruka's desk and then the sheet in Anko's hands, "Am I disturbing you?"

"Not at all," Iruka said pleasantly, "Anko and I were just discussing things that need to be taken care of for the Chuunin Exam, but it can wait for a bit. What can we do for you?"

"I am seeking an instructor who would be willing to teach me how to competently use a katana, and I was hoping that perhaps you knew of one who is available to teach me," Sasuke said, his voice neutral; he never could make himself sound polite, so he had always taken to doing everything with detachment.

It was then that Iruka and Anko exchanged looks—it wasn't a secretive exchange, but a knowing one, and then Iruka smiled and said, "I can think of a very capable instructor, but I'm not entirely sure if she's available at this time, but I'm sure she will be able to think of someone who would be able to teach you. Right Anko?"

"Well, with the exam coming, it'll be tight, but I don't see why I shouldn't try and make some time to teach him," she said in response and then turned her head towards him again.

Sasuke's eyebrows came down in a confused look and then he turned his head to meet Anko's; she laughed then, most likely at his expression. "What's the matter, Sasuke? Didn't think that I knew how to use a katana? Well, you've been enlightened then. It is a busy time of year though, and I will be busy; how much instruction were you hoping for?"

"I was hoping at least for two hours everyday until the Exam begins," Sasuke replied, he didn't know how much training he needed, it depended on how bad his skills were, "I know roughly how to use a katana already, so duration of training can be shortened if it you see it fit."

Anko was quiet for a moment, "When I'm not on missions or involved with the Chuunin Exam, I take on advanced students who would like to learn things from me, and there have been a few who have previously asked to be instructed in the katana. I don't think that I'd be able to teach you everyday, but what about this: I let my best pupil teach you with the katana on the days that I can't. What do you say?"

Sasuke thought about it for a moment, while it wasn't an instructor, he would be taught by her best pupil, someone who she deemed good enough to instruct him, after a moment he nodded.

"Good," Anko said with a grin, "So I'm assuming you want to start as soon as possible, so how does tomorrow sound? I'll be able to meet

you at the place that sells dango—it's near Ichiraku's, so it's not that hard to find. I'll find you at around four o'clock."

"Thank you," he replied, and then he turned to leave.

"Was nice seeing you again, Sasuke," Iruka said pleasantly, "I look forward to seeing how you do in the Chuunin Exam."

"See ya tomorrow," Anko said and she started to give a small wave, but then, stopped herself, reminding herself that he couldn't see it. Or at least she thought he couldn't.

He would have to tell her tomorrow to treat him like he had his sight, because he didn't need her to go easy on him because she thought he was at a disadvantage. He gave a final nod to the two of them before closing the door behind him. Hyuuga Ikane and the other three students were gone from the hall, but and there was hardly anyone left in the building. Satisfied that that task was out of the way, he then began to search for Kakashi—he needed to prepare for the next step in his training.

Sakura didn't get home until nine-thirty that evening, and Ino insisted that she walk her home. Though she had spent the entire afternoon with Ino, she didn't really mind, and was still somewhat distracted. But as Ino stood on the doorstep while Sakura unlocked the back door, she could feel her best friend's scrutinizing gaze on her.

"Hey, think about what I said, okay?" Ino said insistently, "Try just spending some time with him, and I don't mean with rehab, okay? Just offer to do something with him, test the waters a bit."

Sakura inwardly sighed as she opened the door, and after she kicked off her shoes, she turned to the blonde woman who was standing with her arms crossed, "Ino, promise you'll leave this alone. Don't go all matchmaker on me. I can handle this, really; I know you want me to get what I want, but right now I'm not really sure what I want. I want what's attainable, and I don't know if this is."

"Jeez, forehead girl, sometimes I can't believe how much you've changed," Ino said with a sigh, "You always used to be so optimistic, and now you're all 'Mrs. Glass-is-Half-Empty'. Just do something daring for once, it'll be good for you, I promise."

Sakura only nodded half-heartedly, but didn't say anything.

"And don't worry about your dad, he knew you loved him, and if he's still alive, he'll make it home," Ino said reassuringly, "You're a good daughter, okay? And I know he wouldn't want you moping around."

Sakura gave a half-smile, which didn't last very long. Ino straightened up from leaning against the house, "Anyways, I'm going to go. I'm going to do what you said and ask Shikamaru out. And if I find him writing letters to *her* again, in Suna, may God be with him."

It took Sakura a minute to realize what Ino was talking about, then she remembered earlier in the afternoon that Ino had been complaining about Shikamaru becoming pen pals with Sabaku no Gaara's sister in Sunagakure. Ino was suffering the symptoms of jealousy, though Sakura didn't see why she needed to worry.

Her best friend turned and was about to leave when the pink-haired kunoichi suddenly remembered something, "Ino, wait."

Her friend stopped and gave her a quizzical look over her shoulder.

"I want to ask you a favor..."

And then she withdrew the prescription for the anti-depressants from her purse and handed it to Ino.

When Sakura finally bid goodbye to Ino, she felt very weary. She stumbled down the hall towards the kitchen wondering if Sasuke was back; what had he done while he had been thrown out of his house, she wondered? She should make something to eat, even though she herself was not hungry; she hadn't been around to make anything,

so Sasuke at least should be hungry. But when she entered the kitchen, she found that Sasuke had already eaten and cleaned up after himself, as there were a few dishes sitting in the drying rack by the sink, already washed.

"Hey."

Sakura looked over her shoulder, and saw Sasuke standing in the entryway, leaning on the doorframe. His facial expression while not entirely blank, was still unreadable to her, and his eyes were closed. She smiled slightly, glad to see him, but she had spent so much time making herself smile that day that she didn't feel like she could pull off another one that day.

"I'm sorry I wasn't home in time to make some dinner, but I see you managed to fend for yourself," she said placidly, turning towards him, "What did you have?"

"Onigiri and tomatoes," he replied, straightening up and walking towards her; he seemed to be examining her with his senses because he stood close to her.

Disapproval floated across her mind but she didn't really put the effort into making it show on her face. "That's only fruit and carbohydrate, you need some protein—I'll make some tonkatsu or something..." she said, moving to go get the ingredients.

"Don't bother," he said, taking hold of her arm to stop her, "I'll be fine."

"Okay," she muttered with resignation, and she could tell he was concerned by her lack of insistence.

"How was your day?" he asked her after the quietness in the room seemed to reach an intolerable level for him.

She shrugged, "Okay, I guess... Am I feeling any better?"

She was referring to what he had said to her yesterday—the fact that he could sense her emotions just by being able to sense her chakra signature. She knew that her day out with Ino was meant to make her feel better by spending time with people, socializing; Kanaye no doubt had a play in this, though she couldn't really bring herself to mind. While he decided on behalf of her parents—and probably without asking their mother—that she could stay, she knew that he also wanted her to go out. She wasn't sure who tipped off Ino—and Sakura had a sneaking suspicion that it might have been Kanaye—but it had been nice to spend some time with her friend and talk to her.

"You tell me," Sasuke replied, and she knew that whatever answer she gave that he would be uncharacteristically perceptive about it.

She inwardly sighed and then closed her eyes, thinking. "It...it helps not to think about it," she replied slowly, "I think I feel better right now because I'm not letting myself think too hard about it...but that doesn't mean I'm not still upset about what happened."

Opening her eyes, she was in time to see him nod slowly at her and then felt the dreaded prickle of tears behind her eyes. A few seconds later her vision was blurred by the water accumulated in her eyes; she took a deep breath and tried to fight back the rising sorrow. Don't think...if she didn't think, then this didn't have to happen, she mustn't think about all the things she had done wrong as a daughter. Her father knew, he knew she loved him, she had to focus on that. Focus...focus...

She reached out and embraced Sasuke, circling her arms around him, burying her face shamefully in his shirt. The past few days she was ashamed of how much she had rely on him as a security, someone to protect and comfort her, who was the rehabilitator here? Why did she have to be this way? A bitterness filled her mouth when she stepped away from herself and looked at how she was, and for the first time since she agreed to go on anti-depressants did she felt certain in her final decision.

Sasuke held her in the same way he had been doing the past few days, rubbing her back in that way that felt so good. She knew that she shouldn't make much out of the gesture, but she liked it when he did that—it made her feel like he cared for her in way other than friendship, just for a moment. But no, now was not the time to be thinking such things, she couldn't mislead herself, she knew she wouldn't be able to take any more hurt right now if she lost herself and crossed the line. Inhaling deeply, she pulled away from Sasuke, and looked up at his face.

"I need a distraction—let me sit you through a healing session, please?" she asked softly, and without any hesitation he gave an understanding nod.

"Before you start, though, get ready for bed—it's early, but you need rest," he told her; she knew exactly what he was saying even though he wasn't directly saying it—she hadn't been getting enough sleep at night, her troubled thoughts keeping her from being able to slumber consistently. Getting up she proceeded towards the bathroom in order to get ready for bed.

Sakura was slow to change into her pajamas and her mind was feeling distant, lost; she was trying very hard not to think too much, and as a result, both her and Inner Sakura had withdrawn and almost shut down completely. And while she waited for Sasuke to finish brushing his teeth, sitting on what had become their bed, she had a clipboard out and was writing different sections on a blank page. Labels like: "Current Condition", "Comments", "Observations", and "Duration of Session," flowed from her pencil. She was setting up a basic sheet that she would use in order to make her reports to Tsunade, and doing so would pass the time, allowing her mind to be active instead of withdrawn into itself. She had only just finished when she heard the bedroom door shut.

Turning her head towards him, she set the clipboard aside and shuffled to the head of the bed, making room for him to lie down. He sat down on the edge at first, pausing for a brief moment, in which she guessed he was analyzing her; she turned her head slightly

away, not wanting to make eye contact, not that she exactly could. She was feeling self-conscious about her depressed mood at that moment, and she was relieved when he finally moved into position, lying his head down on her lap.

It was nice to have him close, she thought to herself, while she brushed away the stray strands of hair from his face. She liked it when he had his head on her lap, because it was one of those things she knew he wouldn't have allowed under normal circumstance, and she could pretend for a moment that this wasn't strictly professional. Ino had told her to spend time with Sasuke outside rehab, but Sakura didn't know if that would go over too well with Sasuke—she didn't think he'd refuse, but it would be somewhat awkward, especially considering her current condition. So she merely pretended there was something more to this than just healing. The trickiest part was remembering it was pretend; once she was past that, she was okay.

"I suppose since Tsunade-sama wants periodic updates of your condition, I should ask you about your present condition so we have something to compare with," she said, hoping her period of silence hadn't stuck any toes over the line, "How's your sight been?"

"I can't see much, just black and white blurs," he replied, his eyes open; he raised one hand up into the air and moved it across his field of view, his eyes not following the motion. He stopped and then made his hand into a fist before dropping it down again, "Figures move, light sources shift, things are close to me and far away, but I don't see anything for what it actually is. A splash of grey changing could be someone walking by, or a nearby door shutting. At night I can't see anything, it's like being blind all over again."

She paused for a moment, he was tons better than blind, but he would never pass target practice in the Academy, let alone the Chuunin Exam at this rate. The lack of colour wouldn't do either; there had to be more she could do other than extended healing sessions because that clearly wouldn't do it in time. She thought about different factors she could manipulate in order to accelerate

the restoration of his vision. The lack of vision at night was probably what was commonly known as night blindness, and she knew how to take of that.

"Do you like carrots?" she asked after a minute.

There was a small pause—one that not many people would have noticed, but it was long enough for Sakura to know that Sasuke had been thrown off by the question, "Not particularly. Why?"

"Too bad," Sakura replied, "Carrots are high in Vitamin A, which is the basic cure for night blindness. A lack of Vitamin A is a probably what is causing you to be unable to see in the dark. I suppose we don't need to necessarily include carrots in you diet, though; I'm going to be going to the pharmacy in a couple of days to pick up... my prescription, and then I can buy some Vitamin A supplements at the same time. At the rate things are going, your vision won't be perfect in time for the Chuunin exam, and I'd like to do as much as possible to try and get it as good as we can. Including Vitamin A in your diet will probably help."

He gave a nod in her lap, a determined look on his face, "All right. What more will we do?"

"I'll have to think about that," Sakura replied thoughtfully; her mind was busy, she was able to perk up. This was much like it had been while Sasuke was gone, when she had suffered from the dark days of depression; once she was put to work though, her mind never drifted from her tasks. Naruto had said she was such a workaholic, but working herself to near exhaustion had been better than standing helpless before the dark corners of her mind. That was why now she felt a peace of mind in comparison to earlier.

"If I were to suggest something now, though, I'd say that you should try using whatever sight you have; stop relying on your chakra senses now here at home. You were blind for five months, so navigating around shouldn't be that difficult—we haven't moved anything—and what little sight you do have will help fill in what

information your brain needs," she replied, placing her hands on the side of his face, cradling his head, "But I know your sight won't get any better if you're walking around with your eyes closed. See things as they are, not just as your senses perceive them. I know it's not clear right now, but it'll become better with time."

"What about training?" he asked then, and she knew where he was coming from, to train without his senses would be good for his vision, but it wouldn't be that productive preparation for the Exam.

"For now, use your senses, but as your sight gets better, I want you to use your eyes for that, okay?"

He gave another nod.

"Good. Now, I'm going to start," she told him, and she felt him relax entirely where he lay.

This was the first time she had tried to heal his eyes since he had suggested she go on anti-depressants, and she remembered what he had told her: he had strange thoughts entered his head when she healed him. Was it something he could steel himself against? Probably not—knowing Sasuke, he had already tried and was still experiencing them; if he had found a way of being able to prevent them, he wouldn't have mentioned them. Were the thoughts really this, though? Were they actually hers, or were they were his own, provoked into acknowledgement because of her emotions?

She longed to ask him again what kinds of thoughts they were, but instead she merely lay her fingers on the chakra points on his head and let her chakra flow. To her, her chakra was like an extension of her body, and as it flowed throughout Sasuke's chakra network in his skull, she felt each bend and turn as realistically as if her hands were there themselves. She followed the chakra network as it wound itself around his blood vessels, and then carefully she guided it past the cell walls into his bloodstream, allowing her to guide it down deeper and deeper. She redirected it when she felt it arrive at the optic

nerve. Carefully winding her chakra around the nerve cells she picked a particular strand to follow.

The optic nerve was like a bundle of rope, each strand of the rope had a sensory nerve within the eye, and in order to restore Sasuke's sight, she had to heal each strand from the optic nerve to the eye. She could heal many tens of thousands of strands in a single session, but there were approximately 1.1 million sensory nerves in the eye. It was tedious work to heal each sensory cell, then interneural cell until she reached the already active cells. The nerves from Sasuke's optic nerve to the occipital lobe in his brain was functioning perfectly, and once a strand was healed, stimulus given to the sensory nerve would be able to travel to the brain perfectly. However there was a lot to do, and she needed all the assistance she could get in restoring his vision.

So far she had noted slight improvements in some of the untreated cells in his eyes since he was able to see more, and his eyes were being used—however little more—and she hoped that with continued use she'd see an acceleration in the number of self-recovering cells. She did not know what sort of affect Sasuke's diet had on his vision, as she had not been monitoring it. However, she was going to plot and chart the influence of the Vitamin A supplements once Sasuke started on them. She wanted to document this work very carefully, she had to show that she was needed here, because she didn't want to be taken away. This was as close to her dreams as it would get, she didn't want to leave.

Time ticked by slowly and she lost sense of time; she would never really know how much time had passed until she stopped and she only stopped when she felt too exhausted to continue. Her chakra would either nearly be depleted, or her mind was too tired to continue the meticulous task of reactivating each cell. Now as her chakra store got lower, she finished off the last few cells of the strand she was working on, and then she retracted her chakra, stopping the constant flow. She opened her eyes then, and looked at the clock;

eleven thirty. An hour and half since she had started—give or take fifteen minutes.

Looking down at Sasuke, she removed her hands from his face and placed one on his shoulder, almost in an affectionate manner.

"You awake?"

"...Aa."

He lifted his head from her lap and she turned to the nightstand, where she had left her clipboard. She picked it up delicately and began filling in the sections she had made, but while her outer mind was working on that, her inner one was pondering Sasuke in a different respect. He always seemed so tired after each healing session and a little spaced out. His responses were usually mellow and soft-spoken; this was probably a result of her chakra. Her hand jumped in the page, leaving what she had been writing in mid-sentence so she could make note of it in the observations section, and then her hand jumped back and finished the sentence like she hadn't left it at all.

Maybe if she asked Sasuke now, maybe if she suggested that they do something together, he would agree now, and not because he would feel obligated to. She was hoping that maybe if she asked him now, he'd agree because he wanted to. But no, she couldn't do something like that. She would be practically asking him out, and that definitely would over step the line—even though it was a little blurred at this point, there were still two distinct halves, even if where they officially ended was a little unclear.

She wrapped up that last sentence on the sheet and set it aside on the night table again—she would put it away in the morning—and stood up to pull away the covers. When the both of them were settled, she lay staring up at the ceiling, finally daring to open her mouth to speak.

"Sasuke...I was wondering if you'd like to train with me sometime before the exam," she asked hesitantly; training should be okay, it was outside rehabilitation, but it was still a professional situation, "I know I haven't been quite on top of it lately, especially since Dad went missing, but I want to help you, if I can."

He paused for a moment, and then, putting his arms around her, he pulled her against him, holding her close, "... I want to train with you."

His voice was mellow, and the way he spoke was almost out of character, but she smiled to herself anyways, closing her eyes to sleep while putting her hands around him as well. And because she mentioned her father, the darkness of her mind had made itself apparent to her once again, so she consoled herself in Sasuke's embrace. And because she was too busy fighting off her inner miseries, she failed to notice that when he pulled her close to him, that his lips had come to rest against her forehead, and he did nothing to attempt to move them.

"Konan," Itachi spoke her name in the darkness and the said woman opened her eyes.

There were strange phosphorescent stones that could be found in the rock of the mountain, and there were a few scattered throughout the walls of this very room, casting a pale light if one sat around long enough to realize it. And even when her eyes adjusted to the darkness, it was still hard to see anything. It wasn't the best room in the mountain, but Itachi hadn't been the one to pull a few strings to get himself a larger suite like she had. And normally she didn't come here, but Nariko still was set up on the floor in her room, so that was why things were slightly different this time.

She didn't say anything to Itachi's calling, and a small frown crossed her face. Something must be off, for they rarely ever spoke during this time. And even after the door was locked, few words were ever exchanged. She rolled over and peered at him in the gloom, his face

barely visible, but his crimson eyes shone out clear in the pale luminosity that barely existed. The frown on her face was gone by now and she tried very hard to shake the questioning inside her.

"Nariko's fate cannot be altered," he said into the darkness, and after a moment, she realized what he was saying.

"I know," she replied, her face hardening; she decided to not be offended by the suggestion, but it was hard. He had just come back, sealing of the Shichibi would begin tomorrow and then they would move to Amegakure; this would be the only time they could spend together before they arrived, before she would have to play the role of God's Angel—even more so than she already had to pretend here. She would have to maintain the façade of being holy, and that meant for people to think she was a virgin—though she had not been one for many years. She did not want to be angry with Itachi, not now, especially since in Ame she wouldn't be able to be around him as often.

"Do not forget that," he said to her, snapping her out of her reverie.

"Itachi, I think that it's a bit rich hearing that from you," Konan found herself replying coolly, "Attachment is forbidden. Ties, bonds, sympathy—they're all things that we cannot afford. Emotion itself is a weakness. Why do you think you're here with me? Because you care about me? Don't make me laugh. You know as well as I do that this, all of this, is convenience, nothing more."

She saw him nod slowly and then she sat up suddenly. Her azure hair fell over her back, reaching down to her shoulder blades. She pulled her knees to her chest, and folded her arms on top, looking stonily forwards. That had been close, she noted, closing her eyes and calming herself; she knew that the Sharingan would be able to see the tears before they formed, and while she had no mental desire to cry, the feeling had begun to accumulate in the back of her eyes.

"I'm not the one who is going to be teaching Nariko how to read," she said, ice slipping into her voice; Itachi propped himself up on his elbows, "She absolutely adores you. I don't know whether it's that you are good at pretending to be nice to her or whether you yourself have developed your own fondness for her."

She turned and looked at him then, the strange approaching of tears having disappeared for the time being, but as always, it was impossible to see any emotion behind his eyes, no matter how hard she looked. He reached up and caressed her face, but she did nothing in response.

"I could think of nothing to tell her at the time that would seem a viable reason that she should not learn," he replied dropping his hand away, her motionlessness letting him now that she was too irritated to be distracted, "She's not important to me."

She wanted to ask: 'is anything?' but she did not say a word. She didn't want to know, even if she wanted to ask. The answer was something that she was not sure if she wanted to hear. 'No' was what she was afraid he would say, she was afraid to find out that it was true that he cared nothing for her. Though that undoubtedly was the truth, it somehow made it easier if he didn't say it. She was also afraid that he would say yes, because she knew what that would imply. And what then, if he said yes? It would violate all they believed in as shinobi, to care for one another. It was precisely for that reason why never spoke during this time.

The silence drew out for a moment and then Itachi reached out to her again, pulling her into his arms as he fell back against the pillows. She was still irritated with him, but she let herself fall into his arms anyways, her lips caught against his in a loveless kiss. It was exactly how the kiss should be—loveless. Though that may not be how she wanted it. While she knew she had a certain fondness for Itachi, it was something she could control. She had always made it a habit of expecting never to see him again; that way in the event that he never would return, she wouldn't be affected adversely. She did not know if she would be able to maintain that ability if she asked

him if he cared about anything. It was better the way things were: no questions asked, no questions answered. This was pretend, this was a game—it would stay that way.

A/N: This chapter contains the first kiss scene in this entire story as of yet, and it takes place forty chapters from the beginning, and it isn't even between Sasuke and Sakura. It's between Itachi and Konan, and it isn't even a loving kiss! I'm not sure whether I should bask in the glory of how evil I am to those of you who are anticipating a kiss between Sasuke and Sakura (which will come, eventually I promise), or whether I should be disappointed in myself because the first kiss in this story *wasn't* between Sasuke and Sakura. D:

On an entirely random and different note, I compiled all the Blind chapters up until chapter 42 on Microsoft Word, because I was bored, and it came to a whopping five hundred and sixty seven pages, excluding author's notes. Fanfiction? I'd say Fannovel at this point. O.o

The Adventures of ObsidianSickle and her Editor

Editor: You know, the whole 'I want to train with you' thing is the equivalent of the whole 'I want to fight you, too' thing with Naruto. Except that was a prelude to horrible things happening.

Sidian: Yeah, but this time it isn't a prelude to terrible things.

Editor: No, it's just a prelude to lots and lots of children.

Sidian: (kills self laughing)

Owari

Chapter 44

A/N: Okay, so thank you to xBlu3-Appl3x for pointing out that the first kiss *wasn't* in chapter 43, but in chapter 31, where Naruto accidentally knocked Sasuke into Sakura, causing him to kiss her on the cheek (inadvertently). Also, the whole ItaKonan thing—apparently a lot of you weren't aware of just how...intimate...their relationship is, even if it is rather lacking in true affection. I guess some people just did some skimming and read the lines instead of between them. Anyways, some of you (probably most of you) are PeinKonan fans. There is only one reason that I do not support that couple, and I'll tell you here. (POSSIBLE SPOILER ALERT)

As mentioned in the manga, Pein consists of six bodies, one of which is Konan and Nagato's former comrades, Yahiko. Now the reason I don't support PeinxKonan is because it's essentially NagatoxKonan. Now, I don't know why, but I *seem* to be the only one who sees the striking resemblance between Nagato and Konan. I was given—right off the bat—the impression that they were brother and sister. So, for those stated reasons, I see PeinxKonan as practically incest, even though Nagato no longer inhabits the body that could possibly be Konan's biological brother. Any of what I have said has yet to be proven, so they could very well have no relation whatsoever, but I wouldn't put it past Kishimoto to reveal they are siblings, and crush fandom's dreams. He strikes me as that kind of person. :p

THREE THOUSAND REVIEWS?! I am not worthy!! (bows profusely, a la "Japanese Tradition". If you have not seen that, Youtube it, it's so hilarious.)

Chapter Forty-Four: Fear and Irritation

Konan only woke once during the night, and when she pried her eyes open, she could not figure out what had woken her. She lay in the gloom, listening to Itachi's slow and rhythmic breathing, wondering why she had awakened; she was fully conscious and alert now, and that only happened when she felt she was in danger. Yet there was no evidence to suggest that she was in harms way at all, or at least until the noise came—the noise that had probably woken her.

There was a slight snuffling coming from somewhere in the room, sounds made by a small creature that was lurking somewhere in the gloom. There was the sound of scampering, and then more snuffling. Mice and rats were not uncommon in the hideout, though there had been a deficit of them for some time as traps and poisons had lowered their numbers, and Hidan too had taken to using them in his twisted rituals—which disgusted even her.

She rolled over onto her side where she could see the crack underneath the door, the light spilling brightly out from underneath. It was a rather large crack, and she could see how a rat could easily squeeze underneath, and she was more or less just irritated by the presence of the rat than alarmed by it. She only couldn't figure out why it had woken her. Closing her eyes again, she tried to fall back asleep, pushing the rodent from her mind.

Skitter...skitter...snuffle...skitter...

Angrily she opened her eyes again and propped herself up on her elbow in order to see where the stupid vermin was. She quickly halted as her eyes came upon it; it was sitting all hunched up in front of the crack under the door, the light spilling onto it so she could see it quite clearly, but that was not why she had stopped. The rat was glaring at her—actually glaring—and it was what kind of eyes that the rat had that unnerved her. The Rinnegan was glinting at her from the light under the door, and the silhouette of the body revealed to her a thick piercing through the rat's neck and two through the palms of the front paws.

Anger flared within her, and reaching down to the ground she picked up one of the discarded garments on the floor and hurled it at the rat. It missed entirely, but it was enough to get the rat to jump to the side, hiss at her in an angry manner and scuttle under the door, disappearing from sight. That was why she had woken, she noted with displeasure, as she lay back down in bed. Itachi's breathing was still regular, and she was glad he hadn't awoken from the ordeal as well.

Still inwardly fuming, she closed her eyes for the final time that night, her mind cursing Pein. Whether she spent time here with Itachi was none of his business—he had no right to send one of his stupid summonable creatures to spy on her, or to remind her of her place in Akatsuki, or whatever he had hoped to accomplish by sending that damned rat. Whatever he asked of her, she did without question, without complaint, but when it came to who she spent her time with, or whatever she did in the time she was not under orders from him, she would not let him have any say in it. It was not getting in the way of her role, and she had not grown attached to anyone. She was not stupid, and above all, not weak.

Hours later, hundreds of miles away in another country entirely, Sakura came to wakefulness as well. While she had been able to sleep, it hadn't been a restful one; she had lain awake for a very long time, trying to fall asleep, and when she did, she did not realize it. And when she awoke, she did not realize she had woken up either—to her, she felt like she had been lying awake for hours, instead of drifting in and out of sleep. As she lay in bed now, she wondered to herself how long she had been lying there awake, and slowly she pried her eyes open only to have the clock read out the time to her. It was five thirty in the morning.

It was still dark outside, though the sky was getting lighter as the sun would be rising soon, making things in the room slightly visible. Groaning, she slowly sat up; she must have fallen asleep at some point, she realized, because she couldn't have possibly been lying

there for that long. Even though she was exhausted, sitting on the mattress, her arms hugging her knees in the coolness of the room, she didn't feel like trying to go back to sleep—more like she knew that she would be unable to if she tried.

She glanced down at Sasuke, who seemed to be still asleep next to her. The Uchiha prodigy had had an untroubled sleep during the night, and she was glad that at least one of them had managed to get a good night's sleep. At that moment, his face looked so untroubled, and the way the blankets covered him made him look so relaxed.

She smiled slightly and brushed aside some of his hair which had fallen down slightly in front of his face. "Ohayo, Sasuke-kun," she whispered quietly, so that he would not wake up.

It felt strange to call him that now, she was so used to calling him by just his name that the suffix almost seemed silly. Tsunade had forbidden her to call him that, because he was a criminal, but now as she looked at him, she couldn't see him as the person who had betrayed their village—he was Sasuke again. She could probably begin using the suffix again at this point, yet it just didn't seem to fit anymore. The suffix had been her way of saying his name affectionately, but now she could feel her affection in her voice even when she spoke his name without it. The suffix was no longer needed and she no longer attached it to his name, but...in her heart he would always be her Sasuke-kun.

Slipping quietly from the sheets she stole away to the bathroom and twenty minutes afterwards found herself wandering the halls of the house idly. She wasn't hungry at that hour in the morning, and Sasuke wasn't awake to eat anything if she made something; the need to accomplish something was tugging at her, and she wanted something to do. She looked out the kitchen window, and saw the pink that was fading into view over the eastern horizon. It was early, she knew, but if she recalled correctly, the pharmacy was open, and she could go buy some vitamin A supplements. Ino said that her prescription would most likely be available first thing in the morning,

and she could maybe...pick up the dreaded anti-depressants as well.

Putting on a jacket to protect against the morning chill, she stepped outside quietly, locking the door behind her. She glanced out at the garden as she turned to make her way to the side path beside the house, her glum mood only made even more so when she saw it. She had meant to get so much done when they came back from Kumogakure, but as of yet, she hadn't done a thing. She felt so disorganized; she couldn't plan, she couldn't do hardly anything without direction; anything she did was on impulse, like going to the pharmacy that morning, she felt like she was drifting along. But this...this wasn't nearly as bad as it had been...that one time.

She walked through the old Uchiha district alone, passing few people; the only people who were out were those with young children and the elderly, so she didn't need to put a smile on for anyone right now, as most of her friends and acquaintances would still be in bed at this hour. And those that were up were most likely training somewhere where they wouldn't run into people. She was perfectly fine with this.

Her wanderings led in the general direction of the pharmacy, but her feet by no means took her the shortest route there; she kept finding herself in front of places that seemed to have some meaning in them. The first place she came across was the old Konoha Military Police Headquarters, and after she had noticed it, she stood in front of it for a while, her hands shoved in her jacket pockets as she observed it. The building was dark and quiet, lifeless from being unused for so long—she could see bars affixed on the windows, and a thick chain with a lock was linked around the front door handles. It had been a long time since she had seen the emblem of the Konoha Military Police, and seeing the blue shuriken with the Uchiha fan in the center made the building seem so distant, even if it was standing right in front of her. She felt like she was looking through a window to the past, but the peeling paint on the emblem reminded her it was

the present. Even though the tragedy was nine and a half years past, they never put the building to use.

She blinked one last time at the abandoned building; Sasuke had once dreamed to be the Captain of the Military Police Force, huh? She turned and continued down the road, her mind mulling over the knowledge, maybe that goal could still one day be attained—it might not be too late to save that dream.

Her feet took her numerous places more, she wandered over the red bridge where they used to meet as a team before missions, where she and Ino used to play as kids; by the library where she spent so much of her time during the darkest part of her life; by the hospital where she had spent so much time, at Tsunade's side, observing and learning. Finally, a few blocks further from the hospital, she came to a stop in front of the pharmacy. Through the glass front doors she could see a clock on the wall—it read six-thirty. Though it was a ten minute walk from Sasuke's home to the pharmacy, but it had taken her over half an hour to get there. Slowly she walked forwards and the automatic doors slid open at her approach.

There weren't all that many people in the pharmacy at that hour; the people who were there were composed mostly of the geriatric crowd. Sakura glanced once at the counter at the back of the room and decided that she would search for the vitamin A supplements first. She wandered the aisles slowly, her eyes scanning over the different products; band aids, toothbrushes, dermatologic creams, braces and splints—all of these products passed within Sakura's range of vision before she found the vitamins. She selected a couple of different containers and after reading the technical information on the back of each of the boxes, she selected a brand in which she was satisfied.

She had found the vitamins and now.... She glanced to her left at the pharmacist's desk where an older bespectacled woman was flipping through a drug company catalogue listlessly. Turning in the exact opposite direction, Sakura moved to head directly to the till and out the door, when she collided head-on in to a cardboard box...on legs. Stumbling back a couple feet she looked at the box, where there

were some brand names and other things stamped on the side; she had just bumped into one of the staff, probably who was out going to restock shelves or something.

"Ack! I'm so sorry!" came a very familiar voice, "The box is so big I didn't see you there."

The corner of the box turned so that the staff member would be able to look up the person—Sakura—who she had crashed into. "Are you alri—" Ino's voice died when she saw her pink-haired best friend standing there.

"Good morning, Ino," Sakura said pleasantly—rather, as pleasantly as she could, considering how glum she was feeling that morning.

"Hey, Sakura," Ino said with a warm smile, but there was an anxious look behind her eyes, "You're here pretty early. You're here to pick up your prescription, right?"

"Um..." Sakura started; she had been about to flee from the pharmacy without getting it—she told herself she'd get it later, but... She was just trying to avoid it, she knew...but now that Ino had found her... "Yeah."

"Alright, I'll go to the back and check and see if it's ready," Ino said, adjusting the box on her hip, "I gotta take this huge-ass box back there anyways...sheesh, it's heavy. Come on."

Mutely Sakura followed Ino, who was merrily talking away, complaining about the early hour of the morning in which she had been called into work, the unusual slow business of late, and a number of other things that Sakura paid little attention too. She was only half-listening to what the blonde kunoichi was saying, following her obediently; she was going to be getting her prescription, whether she liked it or not. It was probably a good thing that she ran into Ino, or she would have been too afraid to get it. She was such a coward.

She leaned against the counter while Ino disappeared to the back, and a few minutes later, her blonde friend returned triumphantly with a pill bottle in hand. She slapped it down in Sakura's palm, and slowly the pink-haired kunoichi closed her fingers over it.

"Now, the prescription is set so that you take two pills once a day for —" Ino began but Sakura cut her off.

"Thanks Ino, but I can read the instructions on the prescription as well as you can, and the instructions on the bottle too," she smiled softly at her friend's automatic launching into an explanation of how she should take her medication.

"Right, sorry," Ino replied sheepishly, and then when Sakura giggled, she put on a mock defensive tone, "Hey! It's not my fault that half the time when I'm handing out prescriptions it to elderly people who usually have Alzheimer's and can't remember anything unless you spell it out to them."

Sakura just gave a small smile, "Thanks for getting my prescription, Ino."

"Don't worry about it; what else are friends for?" Ino asked, and then caught sight of the other object Sakura had in her possession, "What's with the Vitamin A?"

Sakura hesitated; she hadn't yet told anyone save for Tsunade and Shizune that she was trying to restore Sasuke's sight. Things had improved dramatically though, and while things were still going relatively slow, but it looked like it was almost definite that things were getting better. What could the harm be in telling Ino? Well, other than the fact that everyone else would find out; but if she emphasized that she was *trying* to restore his sight, not say that she was actually *succeeding* .

"It's for Sasuke," she replied looking down at the packaged vitamins, "I've been trying to restore his sight."

Ino was silent for a minute, like she had totally missed what Sakura had said. The pink-haired kunoichi could almost hear the cogs going in her brain as they whirled, and then there seemed to be a pause where everything clicked.

"That's impossible though, isn't it?" Ino said, a frown descending upon her face, "Sakura I know you're not feeling on top of the world, but that doesn't mean you should take on impossible tasks to distract yourself. You have the medication now, you'll feel better soon."

"Thanks Ino, but you know, I've been trying for months now to restore his sight," Sakura replied, shaking her head slightly, "Even before I knew Dad was missing."

"And you're still trying?" Ino asked, seeming even more perplexed, "Don't tell me you've succeeded."

"I haven't—not yet," she glanced down at the vitamins again, "I just hope this'll up our chances."

"Are you sure this isn't a waste of time?" Ino said, uncertainly, "I mean, it's been so long since the wound healed over..."

"Tsunade-sama doesn't think it's a waste of time. Right now it's the only reason why I'm still living at Sasuke's home. I just hope she's right though, I don't want all my time to have been wasted," Sakura replied mellowly, and then after a beat of silence she waved, turned, and walked away.

"Hey! Where are you going?" Ino called after her as she headed towards the till.

"Home! Cross your fingers for me—I promised I'd get his sight back, so I can't waste time here when I could be wasting it on him!"

There was silence behind Sakura for a moment, but then it seemed her best friend had regained her composure. "But we didn't even get

to finish chatting!" Ino shouted, causing a number of the patrons to look at her, save for the ones who were mostly deaf.

Sakura just waved and rounded around the corner of an aisle before joining the short line to the cashier.

Since he had returned, Nariko had firmly affixed herself to Itachi's side like a shadow, which was saying something, seeing as he had only returned yesterday. Konan had only just left his room and disappeared around the corner when Nariko came walking back around the same hallway and up to his side. He had thought long and hard about what he was going to do with Nariko during the time of the sealing of the Shichibi—she herself could not be anywhere near the room where they would be performing the sealing. He needed her otherwise occupied for the next three days if she were to continue to be oblivious. It was too late to teach her how to read, and it was only so long before she got bored of the origami that Konan had taught her in his absence. She needed a long-term project to keep her distracted.

He mulled over the possibilities in his head as he sat next to the said Jinchuuriki in the mess hall, waiting for her to finish her morning meal. She had changed some in the two months he was gone; she seemed surer of herself, and more knowledgeable than before. She seemed slightly distant since yesterday, her enthusiasm seemed thought out and she was slightly...preoccupied. But whatever seemed to be bothering her was easily set-aside in an instant and she was as talkative as usual. Perhaps she had run into a bad situation with Hidan—it would be a perfectly viable explanation.

Whatever the case, they couldn't risk her running into them while they worked. A person was probably what she needed to be distracted, but who? Who was disposable at this time? The Akatsuki members occupied, the lesser members scrambling to pack in the haste to get moving in three days, there were not very many people available. An idea came to Itachi then, he could think of something she could do that would keep her on her toes for the next few days.

She could watch over and feed the ANBU prisoner that had he had successfully identified last night: Haruno Kisho.

There were many risks involved, but after seeing how well he was bound and observing Nariko's desire to do anything to please him, he was sure those could be minimalized. Hidan had come up with a technique during one of his rituals, when using a combination of seals and the victim's blood it allowed him to set up a barrier that suppressed a person's chakra so severely that the prisoner would be slightly physically impaired as well. If the prisoner was further restrained, it would impossible to escape. The only thing he needed to be concerned about was if Nariko would free the prisoner or not.

He looked over at her where she was demonstrating to him how she had accomplished the arte of basic etiquette in his absence, narrating to him the specific dos and don'ts that she had learned. She was now demonstrating how, now that she was finished eating, she would put her chopsticks neatly on the side of her bowl.

"Flower-chan said that my table manners were so horrible that she almost didn't see the point of teaching me, but I've been working really hard at them so—"

"Nariko," Itachi spoke her name and she abruptly halted in her speech to look at him, "I and the rest of Akatsuki are going to be busy for the next three days and we will be unable to be around."

"What? But you just got back! You haven't had time to tell me about your trip yet!" she said incredulously and with deep disappointment.

"I will be able to tell you whatever you would like to hear afterwards," Itachi replied patiently and not altogether truthfully, if not ambiguously, "But it is very important that we are not disturbed. There is also a task that needs to be dealt with while the rest of us are occupied, and I would like you to be the one to do it."

"Me?" as predicted, Nariko's lit up with the eager-to-please temperament she possessed, and he could tell that whatever words

he spoke now, she would be hanging onto every one, "What do you want me to do?"

"Come with me, I will show you," he replied, getting to his feet—Nariko was quick to follow suit.

He led Nariko down the hallways down to the dungeons where the prisoner was being kept, all the while, Nariko continued to cast curious glances, but she didn't say anything. She kept up to his pace easily thought she was quite short from lack of nutrition; she was also walking rather stiffly, seeming apprehensive, looking around like a wary animal.

He only halted his observing glances at her when there came noises from up ahead. He turned his head and his eyes could make out approaching shadows. It was undoubtedly the procession of guards that would taking the Shichibi to the sealing room. Nariko looked ahead curiously, and Itachi speculated over the crossing of their paths. It should be safe enough; Nariko was unaware of the Shichibi's true identity—other than causing curious questions to come from her, there should be no incidents.

The procession came into view, led by two subordinate guards, and brought up by two more guards; the Shichibi was walking obediently forwards between them, no resistance offered. The guards all gave him a respectful nod of the head as they passed, knowing better than to bow with a prisoner in their midst. Itachi gave a curt acknowledging nod in return, putting a hand in front of Nariko as he stopped to let them pass.

It was only when the Shichibi passed the two of them that the Seven-Tailed Badger's Jinchuuriki looked directly at Nariko. His face was somber, and his strange yellowish eyes held the light of a broken person. It was almost as if he looked upon her with as much pity as he held for himself, and he almost seemed to be saying: "I told you." But all of this escaped Itachi's notice, for the instant before Nariko and the Shichibi's eyes locked, he noticed the very last person in the procession, it was Tobi.

Actually, Itachi wasn't sure who was currently brining up the rear. It was either the brain-damaged, Uchiha who they knew as Tobi, or it was his master who was currently dominating the body—Uchiha Madara. His master's appearances were sporadic at best—as a last-ditch attempt of achieving his goals, Madara had attached himself to the body of an Uchiha who had been partially crushed by a rock outside of Kusagakure. The body had been healed by the time he had affixed his soul to it, but the brain damage of the host was irreversible and made it difficult to come into control. When it did happen, the duration of his control was unpredictable. So there could be one of two people coming his way; the question was, which one?

His gaze held the approaching Uchiha carefully, unsure whether he should be the one paying respect or if he should be the one who should be respected. It was when the form of Tobi met his gaze and held it that he knew it was Uchiha Madara who was present. He lowered his gaze submissively and gave a small bow, keeping his master's feet within view. It was then that he spoke, causing the man to pause.

"Sensei, now is not the time, but there is something I need to speak with you about, in private," Itachi did not meet his gaze when he straightened up, but he felt it on him as Madara scrutinized him, "It is in regards to my brother."

There was a brief pause. "Understood," Uchiha Madara replied evenly, "I will approach you after the sealing."

Itachi nodded and it was after Madara rejoined the passing party that he began to move forwards again. He could sense Nariko staring hard at him from behind, but he ignored her, taking great silent strides down the hall, ones in which Nariko needed to jog to keep pace. It was a few minutes later when they arrived in front of their desired destination; taking out the keys, he unlocked it, and pushed the heavy iron door open. From inside rose the faint stench of blood, which, considering the condition of the room, was understandable.

Inside the room, hundreds of intricate symbols were written on the ceiling, walls and floor, making seals and circles. These symbols were written largely in the blood of Haruno Kisho, though some of it was probably Hidan's as well. The way the seal was written out was so that there a number focus points created where the lines met up, in each place was a strip of paper, upon which was written the word for binding. The focal point of the largest circle was where Haruno sat chained on the floor; his hands were free to move but the lengths of the chains made it six inches sort of being able to put his hands together to use hand seals. The seals in the room suppressed his chakra so that he was unable to use any jutsu that required no hand signs.

Stepping forwards into the room, Itachi noted that Nariko was hesitant to follow, as for Haruno, he didn't even look up to see who had entered. Being careful not to step on one of the sealing papers on the floor, he stood three feet from the man.

"Nariko, this is Haruno Kisho. Haruno-san, it is rude not to introduce yourself formally; Nariko has so kindly decided to be your sentinel for the next few days," Itachi said evenly, and Haruno raised his head ever so slightly, only to give the elder Uchiha brother a contemptuous glare. Itachi ignored this and then turned to Nariko and spoke like the ANBU wasn't present, "He will be a prisoner here, and as of the next little while, he will be your responsibility to feed and check up on."

Nariko glanced at the man nervously, and then turned her gaze back to Itachi, "Is he dangerous?"

"Not as of now," Itachi replied carefully, "However, if he were to get free, he could, potentially, be very dangerous."

Nariko gave a nod but still stepped firmly forwards, and almost trod on one of the pieces of paper on the floor. With a quick hand motion, Itachi held up his hand to stop her, and she halted dead in her tracks, clearly shocked by his quick gesture. He lowered his hand and then pointed at the seal on the floor. Looking down, she saw it,

and then took a careful step to the side to avoid it, and promptly stepped on one of the blood writings. Itachi closed his eyes and patiently recollected himself.

The way that Nariko was behaving reminded him of the many times that he had to deal with Sasuke as a young child. Sometimes, much to his unexplainable chagrin, she reminded him so much of the younger brother that had once looked up and respected him. Much like Nariko did now—no. Why was he thinking about Sasuke? The innocent brother he had once had was long gone, and replaced with a blind brother, who despite his obvious weaknesses, still wanted him dead. As for Nariko, as soon as they reached Amegakure, she probably would be dead, so he needn't pay any more attention to her than he had to.

"You must be careful where you step, Nariko," he told her, trying to blot his thoughts from his mind and focusing on the task at hand, "The pieces of paper and the markings on the floor are what keep this man from being dangerous. If you accidentally tear the paper, he will be able to free himself. The red markings on the floor, you may step on, but try not to do so anyways. If they rub off, the power holding him will weaken, and again, he may be able to free himself. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Nariko said, and she carefully relocated herself onto a bare patch of the floor, "What do you want me to do, Itachi-sama?"

"He needs food daily, and with the goings on of late, there are very few dispersible people," Itachi replied, stoically, "His health is in question as well, so you will be needing to check up on him periodically to make sure he does not die. In the event that something happens to him, alert the nearest person you can find, under no circumstances will you assist him on your own."

Nariko nodded very seriously at him, her eyes large like she was amazed that he would even suggest that she would do something so dangerous. His mind was put a little at ease—he believed she was

trustworthy enough for this task, her loyalty to him and her fear of the others would also ensure that she fulfilled her task.

"He may try and talk to you in order to get you to let him go; do not listen to him, he cannot be trusted," he directed, and again Nariko nodded, "Additionally, be careful when you bring him food, because he might try to grab you. He does not possess much remaining strength, but be wary all the same. Lastly, the keys that I am about to give you, do not let him get a hold of them."

He motioned for her to follow him, and after they were outside the room, the door closed and locked, he handed her the keys. He looked her right in the eye and gave her a very serious look, which she returned nervously, glancing away every now and again. Extending his hand, he offered her the keys and she took them nervously from him.

"Be careful, don't trust him, and get help at the first indication of trouble," he told her and she nodded seriously in response.

"You can count on me Itachi-sama," she replied, putting the keys in the pocket of her Akatsuki cloak, "Nothing bad will happen."

"Good girl," he replied absently before heading back down the hallway. He was very determined to shake the image of her face from his mind before he reached the sealing room, and to forget the uncanny resemblance it had to the way Sasuke used to look at him.

Sakura pushed open the front door as quietly as she possibly could, trying to keep the plastic bag filled with her pharmaceutical purchases from crinkling with her movement. It was eight in the morning, and she had just returned home, after wandering slowly about town some more before finally coming back. She kicked off her shoes and silently set them out of the way—more out of habit rather than making sure Sasuke wouldn't trip on them. As quietly as she could, she made her way to the kitchen, only to be startled half to death to find Sasuke already there.

He turned his head towards her from where he was at the stove, his hand on a frying pan and an egg in his hand. She leaned against the doorframe and breathed a sigh of relief.

"You surprised me," she said, straightening up again, and moving forwards to put her bag on the kitchen table.

"Where were you?" he asked her, turning back to the stove, cracking the egg on the edge of the frying pan.

"I...I went to the pharmacy," she answered, she herself unsure why she had hesitated in answering, "Were you worried about me?"

"Not especially," he replied offhandedly, and she felt her mouth harden slightly into a disappointed line, "Konoha isn't particularly dangerous."

"No, I suppose not," she replied, opening the bag and pulling out the vitamins, "I got you the vitamins. I was thinking you should probably take some every evening before you go to bed, but take some now to start."

There was a considerate pause from him, and then he reached out and took it from her, holding it in his hands, running his fingers over the diagram on the lid—the one that indicated that you were supposed to press the cap and turn it simultaneously. He was quiet for a moment, but he then dropped his one hand and indicated to her side. She looked over and saw he was gesturing loosely at the bag.

"What else did you get?" she knew that he knew she had bought something else, and she knew there was no point in denying it.

She reached in the bag and pulled out the small bottle of antidepressants, "I've got the prescription filled for me."

He gave a slow nod and then asked: "When are you supposed to take the first dosage?"

She turned her head away nervously, "I can start at any time. I was...thinking of starting tomorrow..."

What he did then, surprised her. He raised a hand slowly to her face, and then he took her chin gently in his fingers and turned her head towards him. Her eyes automatically strayed to meet his, and she was surprised to see his eyes open. He probably couldn't see her clearly at all, but he was trying to look at her to convey his next words, she could tell—the look on his face said as much to her.

"Take the dose now," he told her quietly, "We'll take our doses at the same time, so we won't forget."

The intensity of his expression was enough for her, even if there was barely any light behind his eyes. Slowly, she nodded—only once. His hand dropped away from her face, then, and she felt momentarily stunned as the action, of turning her chin, sunk in. It wasn't like they hadn't had close contact than that, they were sleeping in the same bed for crying out loud, but there was something that had sparked in her at his touch. Every day that she was with him, she looked upon him lovingly, but she tried to prevent herself from acknowledging the feeling and being affected by any close proximity they had. It worked for the most part, but when he had cupped her chin like that, she felt exhilaration passing through her. Maybe he did care—

She was snapped from her reverie when Sasuke handed her a glass of water. Hesitantly, she took it from him, and then saw he had one for himself as well. She hadn't even noticed that he had gone to get some. She looked at the tiny bottle in her hand, reading the correct dosage amount and the technicalities, her eyes passing over the list of possible side-effects as well. Nausea, insomnia, over-exhaustion, in rare cases: serotonin syndrome, dry mouth; she wasn't allowed to drink alcohol, as that would stop the effect, not that she drank at all. She knew that she probably wouldn't get most of them, and the one she was at most risk of getting was the dry mouth. Sighing, she set down the glass of water long enough to open the bottle and get two small capsules from inside the container.

Holding them in her palm, she picked up her glass again, and looked at Sasuke. He held a small white vitamin tablet in his own palm, and his glass was in his other hand. He held up his glass to her, and she gave a small grim smile, as she clanked her glass against his.

"Kanpai," she said half-heartedly before raising her palm to her mouth and tipping the small pills inside.

She let them sit on her tongue for a moment, tasting the sugarcoating on the outside; she knew if she let them sit there too long, the sugarcoating would melt away and she would taste the bitter medicine. But maybe that's what she needed. She had spent the past week and a bit dwelling on a past she could not fix, burdening those around her. Perhaps a taste of bitter reality would be best. And as she tasted the first bitter flavour on her tongue, she swallowed, and then put the glass to her lips, letting the soothing water cleanse away the bitterness.

It was later in the day that Sasuke could be seen sitting idly in front of the dango shop that Mitarashi Anko had instructed to meet her in front of, his hands folded neatly under his nose, lost in thought. He had been waiting a while already, but then again, he had showed up half an hour early, and to pass the time he had been mulling over life as it was right now. He was thinking about Sakura at that moment, wondering what she was up to at that time—Ino had come and stolen her away again earlier that afternoon to spend some time with the Hyuuga girl and the one girl on Team Gai whose name escaped him at the moment. There was little doubt that Sakura was in good company. It was for that reason that he had come early, because he had nothing else to do while he waited and he also had nobody to spend it with.

Not that he needed to spend it with anyone, Sasuke reminded himself suddenly, since when had he ever needed the company of others in order to spend time? Why now, all of a sudden, did he want to be in the company of others in his free time? Well, he thought to himself, he didn't want the company of others per se, he just wanted

Sakura's company. It was because she hadn't been on top of things lately, and he was justifiably concerned for her, he told himself, after all, she was a teammate and friend.

"Emo Prince!"

Sasuke raised his head slightly, his thoughts being neatly set aside for the time being; he turned towards the sound of the call, but (to his frustration) could not make out the specific figure from the rest that had called him. He activated his senses and picked out Haruno Kanaye's chakra from the sea of people, soon spotting him jogging towards the stand, where Sasuke was seated. It was only when Kanaye was a few meters away that Sasuke realized that he had just responded to the hated nickname.

"Good afternoon, highness," Sakura's brother greeted cheerfully, coming and taking a seat next to Sasuke, smiling broadly, "I wasn't expecting to run into you today."

Mentally, Sasuke sighed grumpily—he hadn't been expecting to run into him either. "What do you want?" Sasuke demanded, he really didn't want to speak to Kanaye in regards to Sakura yet, he was the kind of person who would seek people out if he needed them—he did not like being sought out himself. He was hoping that his demeanor would usher Kanaye away, but unfortunately for him, no such luck.

"My, aren't we cheerful on this fine day?" Kanaye laughed and then turned to the owner of the dango shop, "I'll have an order please."

The man behind the counter nodded and disappeared to go procure Konoha's famous dango; meanwhile Kanaye turned back to Sasuke, who had resumed his position of sitting with his fingers laced together under his nose.

"How's Sakura?" Kanaye asked, his voice sounding relatively light, but earnest all the same.

Sasuke decided to set aside his irritation with Kanaye for the moment, after all, he was asking about his sister—he cared about Sakura probably just as much as he did, and Sasuke knew that he owed the older shinobi an explanation.

"I did exactly what you said," Sasuke replied, lowering his hands from his face so that they were resting on the table in front of him, but it was by no means a less intimidating posture for him to attain.

There was a pause, "That's great...what did I say?"

Sasuke's initial and internal reaction was that he was incredulous at the fact that Kanaye could even begin to forget, especially due to the gravity of the material they were discussing. Outwardly he frowned and stated bluntly: "You were the one who said it."

"But I don't remember," Kanaye replied, sounding confused, "I said a lot of things to you."

"How is it that you can't remember," Sasuke began irritably, "when you were the one who said it?"

"How can I say that I know why I can't remember what I said when I can't even remember what I said when I was the one who said it, despite what you say in regards to my saying it?" Kanaye argued, a disapproving look on his face.

There was a split second pause, "What?"

"Exactly," Kanaye replied triumphantly.

There was a long pause then, in which Sasuke worked out what Kanaye had said. It had turned out to be a redundant statement with no point made in it at all. Sasuke frowned again except this time it was from irritation rather than confusion.

"Are you deliberately trying to displease me?" Sasuke asked finally, and much to his surprise—and further confusion—the jounin smiled

genuinely at him.

"Not exactly. I was hoping you wouldn't get fed up with me and lose it or something," the long-haired man replied with reflection, "I remember exactly what I asked you to do last week, but I guess I just wanted to test you. You see, the first time you were brought to the village, blind, Sakura gave me a brief summery of your personality, and it was after I left the house last week that I remembered it. I just wanted to make sure that you are still the right guy for the job."

Sasuke absorbed this information, and then after a moment he replied, "I'm not the one, though."

"Sure you are—or at least you can be. There are a couple of ways that I could see things going: a) Sakura comes home, but is even further distraught, not only because of what happened to Dad, but because she is away from you; or b) I can leave her over at your place, but if you don't have the patience to put up with her, then I'd have no other choice but to take her home. But you have the patience to see her through this—that's enough for the job," Kanaye explained, and then was distracted as the man from the stand returned with the jounin's order, setting the three sets of three skewered dango.

"And you determined this by trying to irritate me?" Sasuke replied, raising an eyebrow slightly, entirely confused by this logic.

"Basically," Kanaye replied, picking up one of the slender sticks laden with his treasured snack, "Look, if you still don't believe me, think about this: You were the one who managed to convince her to go on meds. We never could."

Sasuke, who had opened his mouth, prepared to argue, shut it again, and then began to silently brood over the truth of that statement. He had such an affect on Sakura. Did she really trust in him so absolutely? Did she really care about him that much? In a strange twisted way, her desire to seek her own recovery was done

for him, not for herself. She did too much for him—she sacrificed too much for him.

"Do you know want to know how she is or not?" he asked finally, at a loss for anything else to say to her elder brother.

"Nah, I can tell you've got it handled," Kanaye said, his mouth full of dango, a lazy and please smile painted across his stuffed face, "Just let me know the instant that something goes wrong."

Slowly, Sasuke nodded in return.

"Where is she right now, by the way?" Kanaye asked, after swallowing his dumplings.

"Yamanaka Ino took her for some get together with her and Sakura's other friends," Sasuke replied with a half-hearted shrug.

"Ah, I see. That's good," Kanaye replied, putting another dango in his mouth, "So you're sitting here being emo and anti-social because you're feeling lonely, right?"

"No," Sasuke replied so sharply that it almost sounded like a snap, "I'm meeting someone here. And you, what are you doing here, besides trying to irritate me?"

"Actually, I'm supposed to be meeting someone here too, at four o'clock," Kanaye replied, removing the last dango from its stick, "I'm sort of an envoy so to speak. I'm coming in place of someone who's supposed to be teaching some guy how to use a katana, see?"

At that point, Sasuke noticed for the first time that Kanaye had a katana buckled at his side. A beat of silence followed. There was no way that this could be coincidence, the person who was Mitarashi Anko's best student was Haruno Kanaye. He felt a number of expressions try and take residence upon his face, but in the end he could not determine at all how he felt about Sakura's older brother teaching him how to use a katana. It was not like he minded that

Kanaye would be teaching him, but he just never imagined that of all people, *he* would be the one to instruct him. The jounin's carefree and almost happy-go-lucky attitude just didn't seem to mix with the image of a skilled katana-user.

"Whoa, whoa, Emo Prince, I cannot emphasize enough to you how much the 'wtf look' doesn't suit you," Kanaye said, bursting out laughing, "What the hell did I say?"

Sasuke growled slightly at letting his confusion showing on his face, and then once Kanaye had calmed himself, he pointed to the buckled katana at his side. There was a pause from Kanaye, as the jounin's expression changed many times; it faded from amused, to surprised, to puzzled, to uncertainty, and then to blatant confusion.

"Wait, wait, you're the one I'm supposed to be teaching to use the katana?"

"Apparently so," Sasuke replied, getting to his feet, not wasting any time to get any further confirmation, "Let's go. We have wasted too much time by not realizing why the other was here."

"Back up a minute, your highness," Kanaye replied, holding up his hands, "Sorry if I seem to be missing something, or pointing out the obvious, or something, but aren't you kinda...you know? Blind?"

Sasuke paused for a moment trying to figure out how best to put this. He would rather train and then explain later, but he knew he would eventually have to explain to both Kanaye and Anko at some point. Not today, though, he resolved, he turned his head slightly towards Kanaye, though his eyes were closed.

"Fight me first, and assess my skill, that's what you're supposed to do are you not?" when there was no immediate argument from Kanaye, Sasuke continued, "Fight me like I was any other opponent, like I still retain my sight. After that, then you may take into consideration my lack of vision."

Without waiting for a response from Kanaye, Sasuke proceeded forwards towards the training grounds. Kanaye was about to follow when there was a shout.

"Sir, your bill!"

"Aw, crap," was the muttered reply from behind.

Sasuke merely smirked to himself.

A/N: The most recent bits in the Naruto manga have gotten me all jumbled up and confused on what the hell I'm supposed to do with Itachi. This is what happens when you try and write with a character you completely and totally don't understand—at all. At least I know how to fix it...minorly. For those of you who don't know, when this story is completely and totally written out, I'm going to go through it a second time and fix it/revise it a bit. Number one thing to revise: Itachi's whole perspective on life through this fic -.- The second thing I'm going to do is put a second floor on Sasuke's house, because there is one, and I didn't notice for the longest time. (sigh) As for how to notify everyone about version 2.0...I don't know, I'll figure it out when the time comes.

Chapter 45

A/N: Forgot to update yesterday. Oops. (shot)

Okay, I think we've run into a bit of confusion here about my flaming policies. I like to think of myself as a kind and understanding person, but somehow people got me confused with the laws of medieval England. No, you will not get hanged for disagreeing with the queen. Because people seem to be afraid of how I will treat them, I think I need to lay out my policies in black and white:

What Merits Public Humiliation:

Flames. Useless, abusive, and hurtful comments left behind.

Ex. lyk, ur storie sux ass u shud lyk, go kill urself nd ive red mch better stuff thn this omglolbbq!!

What I Will Read With Consideration and Respect:

Comments issuing concerns or pointing out weaker points in my plot or writing style. Disagreements with my view or my opinions. Corrections on spelling, grammar, plot holes, characterizations, flow, etc.

Ex. I have been reading this, and I'm not quite satisfied with this part; I'm concerned about this portion you wrote; I don't agree with this part in your story here, I believe that it is wrong for such and such reasons; you made some errors here and here, and I believe this part of the story can be strengthened here.

I'm not on a witch-hunt people. I do appreciate your concerns and take it into account appropriately, but I will not tolerate "ppl t3lling m3 2 k!!l mys3lf". *That* is where I draw the line. It would be wrong of me, and make me no better than the flamers, if I attacked people for appropriate criticism. I like to think I'm more mature than that and can take a little constructive criticism from time to time. And actually,

one flamer once wrote to me with proper spelling and punctuation, which confused me so much that I just let it go. I wasn't even sure if it was a real flame or if someone did it as a joke to see if I would put them out for 'public hanging'. So good punctuation and spelling gets you points towards me taking you seriously.

A/N Cont'd: Anyways, enough of that. Here, have lots of Nariko-with.

Note: The reaction to the previous all-Akatsuki chapter wasn't as popular(?) as some of the other chapters, and I know that some of you will be disappointed that this one is entirely Akatsuki, however, it had to be done.

Editor's Note: Note on the (?) – 'Sidian forgot what she was saying.

Chapter Forty-Five: The Tainted Daisy

Nariko dutifully marched down the halls of the mountain, carrying a tray in hand; her head was held high and her back straight—she was the very image of importance as she moved. This was the very first task she had ever been asked to do since she was brought into the mountain, and doing her job made her feel like one of the others, not like she was a host to a demon, waiting to have it removed from her.

It was when she began to walk amongst the prison cells as she went that she began to get nervous. The man who was the Shichibi, she had seen him being led by here yesterday, and the look he had given her had frightened her tremendously. He said that he had been surprised that they let her run around; she looked at the tall looming metal doors with wary eyes, she could be locked up in any one of them now herself. No, she shook her head slightly; they hadn't locked her up, and why would they? They were going to take her demon from her and let her go home, Itachi had promised her; the man in the cell, he had said otherwise though. He didn't tell her what

they were going to do, though...maybe he was making it up? She had seen other people in the mountain make up stories in order to keep from getting in trouble. Lying was a new concept to her, but she was quickly becoming more acutely aware of it. For some reason, the man in the cell must have thought he'd get in trouble, why else would he tell her wrong things about Akatsuki?

But she still couldn't help but feel a spot of doubt begin to grow in her.

She needed to think of something else, she decided, she felt very nervous all of a sudden and she wasn't sure why. She should focus on getting to the right place, where the man—Haruno Kisho—was staying. The path was pretty straightforward, and she had been here yesterday, when they came by with the Shichibi—no, think about something else...what else had happened after she got that horrible look from him? Itachi had started to talk to the one called Tobi, she remembered now. And he had then said something that had been able to distract her from the shock of the Shichibi's look. He had mentioned a brother.

Itachi had a brother, she thought to herself; she wondered what he was like. Was he older than Itachi? Or was he younger? Nariko seemed to vaguely remember when she was back at her home, before they locked her away, that she might have had a brother or sister too. All she really remembered was her mother holding a baby in her arms and then hiding it away when Nariko had entered the room. Maybe Itachi didn't know his brother, just like she didn't know her younger sibling—if it in fact had been her sibling—but then again, he had wanted to talk to Tobi about his brother. Maybe when he went away he visited his brother; was Itachi's younger brother happy to see him, she wondered?

She came to a halt in front of the door that she had been told to remember the position of. There were some strange markings on the door, and Itachi had told her that it was a number she must remember. Of course she didn't know what any of the symbols meant, but she decided not to say anything; she could remember

what they looked like, even if she couldn't understand them. She would wait until Itachi taught her to read to learn what they meant. There were three symbols on the little piece of metal, and they were all the same. They looked like three little swirls all lined up in a row. From the middle they would swirl outwards once and then the end of the swirl would be at the top, hooked slightly downwards.

She put the tray of food down beside the door and reached deep into the pockets of her cloak, reaching for the key inside. Her fingertips brushed cool metal and then she clasped her hand around the key ring. Pulling it from her pocket she took her other hand and grabbed the single key that was on it and inserted it into the keyhole. She turned it and then there was that funny little click that meant the door was open; she liked the click, she thought, as she removed the key, she thought it sounded funny. She pulled open the door then, with some difficulty, as it was extremely heavy. When it was open wide enough for her to get in, with the tray, she picked up the food and entered the room.

This was the first time that she had done this by herself, she had been shown by one of the other people who wandered around the halls of Akatsuki. She didn't know what they didn't normally, but they all had some purpose here, and she determined that this person had the role of showing other people how to do things. But now that she was here by herself, she felt a little nervous. Slowly she walked forwards and was very careful not step on either the marks or the paper on the floor, and approached the man.

He was still sitting with his head hung over, and his arms were at his sides. She wondered if it was hard to sleep with the way he was chained up like that. Slowly she approached him like a scared animal. She felt a little braver knowing that the funny feeling in her stomach wasn't there, that only came when she was really, really scared. He looked up at her then and she almost jumped when she saw his face; his eyes were very blue, and she couldn't think of anything that looked similar to that exact colour.

Quick to look away from him, she set the tray she was carrying down in front of him, within his reach. She took a few steps back, being careful to look where she was placing her feet. When she felt that she was a safe distance from him, she gave a low bow, still afraid to meet his very shocking blue eyes.

"Here is your meal, Haruno-sama," she squeaked while clasping her hands together to keep them from shaking.

The man paused, and then reached forwards and took the tray. "I never imagined I'd be sincerely addressed with an honorific 'sama' in the place of my enemies," he said in a voice that neither sounded confused nor surprised, "But thank you."

The comment that he had spoken made Nariko wonder if she shouldn't have said 'sama' at all. After all, she had never seen Flower-chan treat any of the other people in these tiny rooms very politely. Trying to recall exactly how Flower-chan had reacted, Nariko decided that perhaps she should try and do the same now. Itachi did not like this man, so she shouldn't either, she reasoned; though he had never done anything wrong to her. She thought of ways she could fix her mistake—how would Flower-chan act in this situation? She had been cool and calm when dealing with the Jiraiya guy, and then loud when she was in the room with this man. Which way was she supposed act?

Nariko cleared her throat nervously, and then, trying to act a lot tougher than she felt at that moment, she looked up at Haruno, "Don't think that because you thanked me that I like you!"

She had put her hands on her hips like she had seen Flower-chan do before and tried to mimic Flower-chan's expression of mistrust. She had expected Haruno to fall silent, and look away from her, like she had seen a number of the subordinates do under the cold gaze of the blue-haired woman, but instead the man in front of Nariko let out a low chuckle. He reached over with one hand and grabbed the chopsticks and using his teeth and hand, he pulled them apart; there

was a faint smile on his face as he did this. Nariko was utterly baffled by this and stood in amazement; the man was still smiling.

"What?" she demanded, but the bravado was half gone.

"Seeing a scrawny little girl like you trying to act all tough like that... you reminded me of my daughter when she was younger," he replied, moving the tray closer to his feet so he could reach the food with his chopsticks—he was unable to hold the bowl and reach it with his other hand, despite the extension of chopsticks.

"You have a daughter?" Nariko asked slowly, suddenly fascinated. The man she was talking to was a father! That meant he must have a family! She knew she shouldn't trust him, because Itachi had said so, but the desire to find out more was very powerful. If she stayed as far away from him as he possibly could, she *should* be okay...

The man studied her closely for a moment while he chewed on some rice. "Yes. You're probably around the same age she is now, too," he replied after swallowing.

To Nariko, the emotion in his voice was difficult for her to understand; it was like he was missing somebody, or sad about his daughter. Though she did not know the word for it, the word to describe his voice was 'nostalgic'. She was very tempted to ask him more about his family, but she wasn't sure if he would answer. Itachi hadn't been very nice to him, and if he knew that Itachi had told her not to trust him, he probably wouldn't like her very much either.

"Is your daughter really around the same age as me?" she asked, testing to see if he would tell her anything.

The man swallowed another bit of rice before looking at her suspiciously, "Yes, but that's not anything new. That Uchiha brat will already know about her."

Nariko wasn't sure what he meant, but she knew that he had insulted Itachi, and immediately she frowned, "Haruno-sa...er... Just don't

talk about Itachi-sama that way!"

The man looked at her and then scoffed slightly, shaking his head from side to side, "Another Uchiha fan, huh? They seem to flock to those two; I never understand why."

Nariko puzzled over this statement, and then after a moment asked: "What do you mean? What two?"

"The last two remaining Uchiha," Haruno replied, a grumble in his voice, "I don't understand why any woman would want to devote themselves to either one of them, especially Uchiha Itachi."

"Why not?" Nariko asked, and then curiosity pulled her another direction, "Who else is devoting themselves to... the Uchiha?"

She figured that 'Uchiha' had something to do with Itachi and his brother, and she wondered if there were others like her who wanted to help Itachi like she did, or if there was someone there for Itachi's brother. She watched Haruno expectantly for an answer, but when the man's eyes turned cold, regarding her seriously, she found herself take an inadvertent step back.

"Who are you—really?"

This question only served to further befuddle Nariko; she didn't really know anything about herself, so she didn't know how to answer properly. She could only tell him what she knew, but she hoped he wouldn't be angry if it wasn't the answer he wanted.

"I don't really know what you mean... My name is Nariko, and I'm... they say I have a demon in me... Sometimes the others call me the Rokubi... I don't know where I came from, but Itachi-sama brought me here from where I used to live..." she mumbled, not meeting Haruno's gaze, "He brought me here to save me, so that when I go home...they'll accept me."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw his eyes narrow for a moment, "I'm not sure whether this is a new tactic of getting information from me or not. You seem sincere, but yet what Jinchuuriki wears the garb that's the trademark of Akatsuki? And what Jinchuuriki is permitted to roam around their base as they please? Yet your poor method of extracting information makes me wonder if you are who you say you are."

"I am though!" Nariko insisted, facing Haruno nervously, "Haruno-sama, I don't have a family, I don't know what it's like to have brothers or sisters, or really what having parents was like. I just want to know about your family, I want to know what it's like to be...loved."

Haruno's face faded from suspicious and cold to a blank kind of look, but it didn't look unkindly. "Then why do you stay here? What do they have for you here that would compel you to stay?"

"Itachi-sama...and Flower-chan... I guess Deidara-sama a little bit too...they're the only family I've ever had. They've been so kind to me, offering to take the demon from me," Nariko murmured, staring hard at the floor, the little marks of red barely showing in the dim light, like they weren't there. It seemed almost sort of like that, she thought absently, even though the marks held Haruno, the way he talked to her made it seem like they weren't even there...

His voice was extremely grave when he spoke to her next, "Do you know who the Akatsuki really are?"

She looked up at him and then slowly she shook her head.

He then closed his eyes and sighed heavily, "Nariko...The Akatsuki are a band of rogue ninja who betrayed their homes and came together for their own selfish purposes. They are cruel and shrewd; any kindness they have shown you leads me only to believe that they are using you to meet their own terrible goals. Everything you know about them is a lie."

"They're not though!" Nariko exclaimed indignantly, "You don't know them like I do. They care about me, they take care of me, Itachi-sama and Flower-chan both saved my life."

Haruno set down the chopsticks on the tray again and then put his elbows on his knees, probably taking up the most comfortable position he could manage under his imprisonment. He looked at her, his eyes almost as piercing as the Shichibi's had been, but not quite.

"Do you know how they are going to take the demon from you?" he asked her then, so softly that she almost didn't hear him, "Do you know what happens to a person while they take it?"

It was then that Nariko started to shake; she had been shaking earlier out of fear of Haruno, but now she was shaking out of fear for the answer. The Shichibi didn't tell her, even though she had asked, but now that she had the chance to find out, she was afraid to. But something deep inside her made her want to know, she was so afraid to find out yet she couldn't refuse to find out. Slowly, she felt her head shake—just once.

"They die. A horrible, painful death," Haruno replied, his voice was empty, but she could see in his eyes a sadness that she had seen in the Shichibi's, "The strain on the host body is too great, and it kills the Jinchuuriki.

"No," she murmured, her voice suddenly gone, and the word came out all breathless, "They wouldn't do that to me, they wouldn't. Why would Itachi-sama promise to let me go home if I was just going to die! He wouldn't lie to me."

Her heart had jolted at the news and was beating wildly inside her chest. She was trying to keep the rising panic from seizing her; it wasn't true, it wasn't true, it wasn't true, it wasn't true, it couldn't be true, it couldn't be true...

"Wouldn't he now?" Haruno replied sharply, "Did you know that Uchiha Itachi once belonged to my village? He lied to and deceived

everyone, and when we found out, it was already too late."

"Why then? Why would Itachi-sama lie to me? Why would he tell me I would get to go home, that everyone would welcome me back, and that my parents would love me if they were just going to kill me?" she almost shouted at Haruno, taking a step backwards from him.

"He was probably trying to keep you from running away until the time that they saw best fit to remove your demon," Haruno replied, his voice trying to sound kind, but it cut through Nariko's mental innocence like a machete.

Her heart was racing, and inside her she felt her fear begin to brush the thing that slept within her. She could feel the demon stirring slightly from inside, a flicker of wakefulness in reaction to her fear. Quickly, she backed away from Haruno so that her back was against the door. She looked at him in wide-eyed fear, and then she closed her eyes, trying to calm herself. Itachi had said not to listen to anything he said, not to pay any attention to him. He was only trying to trick her into letting him go. But he hadn't even asked her to set him free—no, he couldn't be trusted. She tried not to think.

"You're wrong."

She fled then, her mind racing as she raced to close and lock the door behind her, her hands shaking violently.

He was wrong. He just had to be.

It was a while before Nariko worked up the courage to continue her task of feeding Haruno. She had had to feed him an evening meal, but she had been too shaken to return down there with the meal. She felt badly about it afterwards, because she knew how horrible it had been to be hungry all the time, but she still couldn't bring herself to go down again. His words had frightened her so badly, and she swore to herself that she wouldn't think about it. But because she didn't want to think about it, that was exactly what she thought of.

It was drawing near to the time that she was to bring food to him, yet she found herself idling as the time grew nearer. She was folding those papers things again, what had Flower-chan called them? Origami, that was it. She looked at the white of the page as she folded it; it was a strange thing, the more her hands handled the paper, the more creased and folded it became, like it was becoming more damaged. Such a crisp and clean thing, it didn't need to be ruined in that way, yet it sculpted it into a new shape, so that it was different from what it once was.

All this time she'd been with Akatsuki...had they really been using her, like Haruno had said? Itachi had brought her here to remove the demon, and he said that he would bring her home again. Yet had he lied in order to get her to stay with them, not knowing that she would die? Her parents...everyone else, they would never see her again, did they even care that she was gone? Did her parents miss her? Were they worried? Probably not. But coming here had changed her regardless, she had felt useful, and felt loved...almost. Cared about at least; but maybe it was just the weasel that they cared about. She made another fold in the paper.

The more she worked with the tiny white sheet, her fingers would rub on them, making slight smear marks on them, dirtying the paper. It used to be so clean and white, but as she changed it, it became tinged with dirt, staining it slightly. She would never be able remove those marks from it, and it would always stay tainted. It wasn't as pretty as before it became spoiled with the grime on her fingers. Would it have forever remained white and pure if an outside influence hadn't contaminated it? If not her, then someone else would most likely do it.

Inside the small dark room, she didn't know anything about the outside world. She thought that the villagers hated her, but she hadn't really known anything else, so it was okay. But outside the room, gone and away from everything she knew, she had learned so much. She reflected on every experience she had here in the mountain—she remembered finding Hidan all cut up and bleeding,

and that had frightened her; she remembered seeing the Leader for the first time; she remembered watching Deidara make his little figures of clay; she remembered watching Itachi write long words on a piece of paper; she remembered Konan falling apart into sheets of paper; she remembered the white rain. She had seen many things that had frightened her, but she had seen so much that was so amazing. She half wondered if Haruno was telling the truth, from seeing the horrors in the mountain, but remembering everything else, she wanted to believe that he was wrong.

She turned the paper over and as she did so, the edge caught and bit into her finger, slicing the skin a bit. She let out a sharp gasp of pain and surprise as she did so, and a small drop of blood landed on the corner of one of the folds. She let out one of the angry-sounding words she had heard a number of people say in the mountain and then sucked on her finger, trying to nurse away the pain. Another mark on the page that could not be removed; and the way things were headed, it would probably show on the finished piece, instead of being hidden under a fold. The blood would still leave its mark.

She finished the origami and held it up to examine it; it was a daisy she had made, and it had taken her quite a while, as it was quite complicated and had taken many sheets of paper to complete all the petals. She had seen Flower-chan make one once, but of course much faster than her, as most of it folded itself, but she had asked to know which folds she had to make and then attempted it herself. It was nowhere as nice as the one Flower-chan had made, but the woman hadn't kept the one she had made. The azure-haired woman had said that she hadn't made the daisy in a long time, because she had no use for it. Nariko looked at her daisy, the dirty petals and the rumpled folds...and then there was also the one single spot of blood.

Sighing she slipped the daisy inside her pocket and went to go give Haruno his meal—the last time he had eaten was about this time yesterday. By the time she left, she had resolved not to listen to Haruno, not to dwell on what he said, because she had already done

too much of that. But as she wandered down the nearly empty halls her resolve began to dwindle, and she began to think again. There was something that Haruno had said yesterday that had thrown her off, something that no matter how much she wanted to disregard everything he said, that one bit of information longed to be dug up. She had to know.

She unlocked the door to the cell, and the man looked up at her as she entered. She bit her lip, not really as afraid as yesterday, but just nervous, apprehensive. She saw that he had finished his food from yesterday and the tray was sitting only a few feet from her. She realized that he must have pushed it away from himself with his feet, otherwise it was impossible to get it that far from him. He couldn't reach any of the red marks on the floor with his hands or his feet, but for a fleeting instant of panic, Nariko wondered if he had tried to damage the marks with the tray. She quickly set down the other one and picked up the first. The marks were intact. She felt relief in her.

"Nariko," he said her name kindly and when she looked at him, she felt a little suspicious, but she didn't say anything in reply, "I know that what I told you must be a lot to bear, but you deserve to know. I didn't mean for you to run away. I meant well."

Nariko was quiet for a moment, and despite everything Itachi had told her, she couldn't hate the man, she just couldn't, not when he spoke to her like that. "I...I know," she muttered quietly, looking away; she still refused to believe everything he said.

"Haruno-sa... Haruno-sama?" she asked, finally giving in and deciding to use the suffix instead of trying to find something else to call him, "Yesterday you said something, that made me wonder something else. I might not believe you anyways, but I just wanted to ask... You said in your village when Itachi-sama...lied...to everyone, that when they found out, it was already too late. ...What was too late?"

Haruno closed his eyes and his face was grim, he sighed and then opened his eyes again, the strange colour still causing Nariko to be

surprised every time she saw them. "He was part of a large clan, the Uchiha clan, and he killed everyone. Every. Single. One. Even his own parents."

Nariko felt her insides turn to ice, but yet she felt the desperate need to prove Haruno wrong, to counter this information, so that she couldn't even begin to believe that it might be true. She swallowed hard and tried to frown, though she was so fraught at this point that she couldn't do much in the way of facial expressions at that point.

"That's not true," she said, trying to be defiant, but her icy insides wouldn't let her voice sound right, "I heard him say something to one of the other members before I saw you for the same time. He mentioned his brother, he has a brother, so you can't be right. You're the one who's lying!"

Haruno shrugged a little bit. "You're right, he didn't kill everyone, though I'm surprised you knew that. The only person he didn't kill, was his own little brother. He left his brother alive, and his brother found everyone dead," was the stony reply, "His brother hates him now, and wants nothing more than to see Uchiha Itachi dead. And what's more, my daughter's gone and fallen in love with him."

Fallen in love? She couldn't remember ever hearing the term before, but she instantly knew roughly what it meant. Haruno's daughter cared deeply for Itachi's brother in some way or another, probably in the same way that Flower-chan seemed to care for Itachi, though she didn't like to talk about it, and got angry if you asked her about it. Nariko didn't know what to say to that, nor to the bit about Itachi's brother being the only one alive. Why would Itachi do that? Didn't he care about his family? He had a huge family, but the sounds of it, yet he had gotten rid of them all. She felt a pang of something close to anger run through her, he had been so lucky, yet he threw it all away. Unless...

"Did Itachi-sama's family love him?" she asked quietly, her eyes imploring. Maybe Itachi was hated like she had been... Didn't Haruno say that his younger brother just wanted him dead?

"They did, and that's why I think a lot of people were surprised," Haruno replied gruffly, yet not harshly, "I got to meet Uchiha Fugaku once—that's Itachi's father—and though I never got to know him well, he was a decent man. He was so proud of his sons. And Sasuke, the younger brother, he seemed to look up to his brother so much. I used to see them around town, young Sasuke carried home by Itachi after training or something. ...Funny, now that I think about it, that boy seemed like a pretty happy kid... How he's changed..."

The last little bits of information were said in a distant and far away tone, and Nariko knew that he wasn't really talking to her anymore, but more to himself. Yet she listened intently, her heart racing. She closed her eyes and forced her mind to slow down. Okay, maybe that happened—Haruno had said that his daughter was 'in love with' Itachi's younger brother...what was his name...Sasuke, that was it. But that didn't mean he was the same now. She was just thinking about it earlier that day, people change...she had changed, hadn't she?

"Even if Itachi-sama did kill his family," she said after a while, "I still don't believe they're going to kill me. They wouldn't do that, they're nicer than that...maybe not Hidan-sama, but for the most part they are kind to me. They might take the demon, but they won't kill me; they're taking the demon out of...Shichibi-kun now...he..."

She faltered, remembering the haunted look as they passed in the hallway two days ago, the look of extreme sadness, and that expression of feeling sorry for her. What was happening to the Shichibi right now?

"They're taking a demon out of another one right now?" Haruno asked, and Nariko nodded, or at least she *thought* that's what they were doing, "That makes sense. Why else would they assign someone like you to watch over me? And I bet everyone else is busy moving because we found their hideout... Do you know where they all are right now?"

She thought for a moment and then shook her head, she didn't know where they were exactly, but they had to be inside the mountain somewhere, doing whatever they had to do in order to get the demon out of the Jinchuuriki, not involving death. It just couldn't kill him, why would they want to kill a perfect stranger?

"If you don't believe me, find them, and see for yourself," Haruno told her, his eyes stern as he looked at her, "Then you'll know what fate awaits you."

The mere thought of seeking them all out when they were busy, and she was supposed to be doing something else, caused her heart to leap almost into her throat with fear. Ever since she had visited the Shichibi at his cell three days ago, she had been anxious about the mountain, though she couldn't pinpoint the source. She just had a very bad feeling if she were caught...she didn't know, and she didn't want to find out. Shaking her head very firmly at Haruno, she found her words hard to say.

"I can't!" she squeaked, her voice high, "If they found me, or caught me... I'm not supposed to. I don't want to get in trouble."

"It's for your own sake," Haruno said to her, his eyes sympathetic, "If you don't believe it from me, then find the truth for yourself."

"I can't."

She left then, taking the tray with her. And when she was locking the door, she realized that her hands were shaking again.

It was evening again, and this time, Nariko had before her a paper crane. It was not nearly so crisp and pure as the way Flower-chan seemed to be able to make them, but it was definitely cleaner than her daisy had been. What she was doing right now, was trying to make it fly. She had seen Flower-chan do it so many times now that she no longer jumped when she opened a door and five or six cranes came flying out, going places or doing things that Nariko

knew nothing about; she found that when she herself was trying to get the crane to fly, that it took so much concentration to do so, that her mind had little room for anything else. But even so... No, she mustn't think.

She didn't know how Flower-chan made it fly, but there seemed to be something magic about it. Was everyone magical here, she wondered? After all, Zetsu looked like a plant, and it seemed like there were two people inside his body, Deidara had two mouths on his hands, and she had seen Hidan hurt and broken so badly... She shuddered at the memory and quickly tried to think of something else. Magic, right. She had never felt really special before in her life, and Nariko wondered, maybe because she had the demon, she could use the magic or whatever it was. She heard Flower-chan talking to Itachi two days ago...she said that she had been able to mask her 'chakra signature'. Chakra....that sounded magical to her.

She held the paper crane in her palms and closed her eyes, trying to summon something up in her. There was silence for a while, dead silence, one slow second after another. Concentrate...deep inside her, there had to be something... There had to be...

If you don't believe me, find them, and see for yourself.

Her concentration shattered, and there was nothing left. Nothing. She opened her eyes again and tried to shake the voice echoing in her head, to no avail. Especially since earlier that day, she felt so cold, shaken, nervous. Dread filled her every time she heard those words. But today...today should be the last day, right? If she was going to find out where everyone else was, she would have to do it today... Not that she believed that she would find anything bad, but...

She set the crane down on the table again, feeling grim. She didn't know who to believe in anymore. If anyone... She looked at the door of the room, which was shut; she felt trapped, she needed to get out. She needed to find them, she realized, she wanted to find out. Hadn't she learned that if she was to find anything out, she had to

find it out for herself? How was this any different? She wanted the truth; she needed to find it.

As if in a trance, she walked towards the door, and took the handle in her grasp. The door opened and already she felt a surge of confidence blossoming in her, it was like she had been freed again from the dark room of her past. She scampered down the halls of the mountain, thinking the word 'hide' to herself constantly, not that it mattered much, people had been moving things out of the mountain a lot the past few days, and a good number of them were gone already, still she felt like she was doing something she wasn't supposed to. And this time it was different from all the other times, this time, she had a feeling that she really, really wasn't supposed to be doing this. Out of all the times that she had done something she wasn't supposed to be doing, this was the worst.

She didn't know how long she was wandering, but it felt like days; each room she approached she felt her heartbeat speed up, and then her breath became caught in her throat when she would push open each door. But there was usually nothing behind, just boxes of stored, or sometimes there would be people packing things away but they never noticed her. The tediousness of the task was beginning to take its toll after an hour, and Nariko found an anxiousness building higher in her. Why would they need to hide to take the demon out of Shichibi if there was nothing bad about it? Why did it have to be a secret if they weren't doing anything wrong?

Her chakra...maybe...because the man with the demon was the same as her, maybe...if she tried... Maybe she could find him that way...

Ducking under a table in the next room she sat cross-legged on the floor. Concentration—that was it, simple concentration. Closing her eyes, she sat up a little straighter and then yelped because she had bumped her head on the bottom of the table. Rubbing the top of her head, she closed her eyes again, trying to ignore the throb on the top of her skull as she concentrated. That day, those years ago, when the bright flash had erased those two boys from existence in front of

her, she had felt that power then, she knew that somewhere in her, whether it was hers or the demon, she had that magic, that chakra in her.

It had come from her stomach, and had made its way outward to her hands, and her mind, she had seen the demon's wicked face then, like she saw it in her dreams at times, when she was frightened...like she had dreamed last night. If she followed that path back...

Clenching her hands into fists, she put them to her forehead, thinking; she had felt the power run through her arms, following close to her bloodstream, she somehow knew this, though she knew very little about the inner workings of any human body. Her consciousness raced down, down, down deep into her, running through her, seeking her power.

A sudden cold submersed her, a darkness seemed to be pushing down on her. And then, she felt like there was a storm around her, compressed and forced down into something too small to hold its capacity. There was crackling around her, and deep thudding trembles, and it was damp, she smelled the damp. Opening her eyes, she found herself not under the table where she had seated herself, but instead sitting up to her waist in frigid waters, the white rain falling down from a stormy sky, where lighting flashed. And before her stood a cliff face with a large gaping hole in the side, bars streaking across it in a haphazard arrangement; a slip of paper was wrapped around a segment where two bars crossed, but Nariko did not know what was written on it.

Rising up from the ground, she walked forwards towards the bars, though everything that she knew told her to stay away from them. She couldn't help it, she felt herself drawn to them, some part of her was on the other side of those bars. Her legs shook as she walked, the icy water having made them so cold, the white mist came out of her mouth and nose, just like it had on the night of the white rain.

Stormy winds whipped around her, and she shivered, her arms trembling and goosebumps rising up on her skin. Yet despite her chill, she proceeded forwards, and even though with each step, she

wanted to turn and run, she found herself unable to. She was so small in the shadow of the cliff, she could slip through the bars so easily, some mad desire to pass through them was what pulled her forwards; if she crossed through them, then...

There was a flash of lightning that lit up the area, and Nariko got a glimpse of what was behind those bars; two yellow eyes shone with a malicious glint, eyes that belonged to a large sleek animal, six tails swishing back and forth. She felt a pulse beat in her ears, a pulse of the biggest fear she had ever felt before; she stopped—the longing to pass through the bars was not strong enough to over power her fear of what lay beyond them. And when she stopped, she heard a low hiss of displeasure.

"So we finally meet, girl, face to face," came a hissing and rasping voice from behind the bars, "I never thought you would seek me willingly. What do you want?"

"You're...the...Rokubi," Nariko whispered, her voice trembling, from both cold and fear, "You're the demon..."

There was a prideful snort. "I am. Rokubi no Raijuu," the weasel hissed, and then spat, "How dare a pathetic whelp like you seek me out?"

"Please, you have the...chakra, right?" Nariko asked, not forgetting her mission despite her overwhelming fear; she needed to find Akatsuki and she had to find the Shichibi.

"What chakra?" the weasel snapped with an angry hiss, "How dare you demand it from me?"

Nariko firmed her mouth in to a hard line. This thing lived in her, yet it had never managed to harm her. Why should now be any different? If she wanted to find out what she wanted to know, she needed to be hard, demanding. Like Flower-chan, and not back down, or like Itachi, and not show she was scared.

"Use it, use your chakra to find him," Nariko stated determinedly, clenching her fists.

"Don't talk in riddles, girl," the best snarled, and Nariko saw it draw close to the bars, its smallish nose peeking out between two bars, the lips curled back.

"You know who!" Nariko shouted, sounding a lot braver than she felt, "The Shichibi! If you really call yourself a...a Bijuu, then you would be able to find him!"

"Shichibi..." there was a low hiss when the word was spoken and then a wicked sounding chuckle, "Kaku...hmm, you're smarts couldn't save you this time, hmm? I acknowledge your brilliant mind, yet like a fool you got yourself trapped inside a worthless human too, hm? Laughable."

Nariko crossed her arms, mimicking Flower-chan's demanding posture. She didn't care what the Rokubi was talking about, and it didn't seem to be talking to her. It didn't matter to her what it was talking about, but she had problems with being ignored, she needed the demon to find the other one, so that she could find out the truth, she needed to know the truth.

"He's here, in this mountain, right now. Find him, I know you can."

"You're in no place to be making demands," it hissed, and then quite suddenly a paw lashed out from between the bars, stopping two feet from Nariko's face. There was an angry yowl, but then the paw retracted, "So close. Such a pathetic race, humans, yet too lucky for their own good. Who are you to be making demands when if you had been standing a little bit closer, I could have gained control of you and escaped? You don't realize how poorly sealed I am, girl. Enough to keep me in, but..."

The dangerous-looking chops pulled back their lips in a smug grin. Nariko trembled even harder where she stood, the cold no longer being the source; she had to convince the Bijuu, Raijuu or whatever

to find the other demon—she had found this one inside herself, she had come so far by herself. She couldn't give up, not now.

"I promise to let you go," she murmured, her chattering teeth almost making her words unheard.

The demon narrowed its eyes at her and she nodded for emphasis. She knew it was a dangerous thing to say, but she had learned the art of half-truths from Flower-chan. If Akatsuki took the demon from her, she would technically be letting him go. With baited breath she waited apprehensively, she didn't know if the demon could see into her mind or if it could tell she was not telling the truth; if she hadn't fooled the demon, she didn't know what it would try to do to her.

"Why should I believe you?" the demon said, but it had noticeably paused, seeming interested in hearing what she had to say, "You know I would kill you the instant I was freed from you?"

"That may be," Nariko said carefully, her teeth still chattering, "But you can stay with me until I grow old and die, or I can let you go. Find the Shichibi, and I will have you gone from me before the end of the year."

There was a pause from the weasel, and then all at once there was a surge of power emanating from within the hole in the cliff side, causing lightning to flash across the sky with greater frequency. Nariko suddenly felt like she was yanked backwards; the cliff and storms retreated, the water rushed by her legs and then left her too. She was whizzing at impossible speeds, and then the blurred images around her began to get clearer: she was sailing through the halls of the mountain. Her spirit rushed down the halls, twisting and turning up the labyrinth, taking her higher in the mountain; she was aware of every single spirit and presence that resided anywhere near the path and as she struggled to remember the path, she found that she could feel all her senses heightened.

Shortly after she began to slow down, she came to a halt before a small door at the end of a hall. The demon passed her beyond it,

briefly but then yanked her back, snickering. She had only caught a glimpse of being near the top of a large cavernous room, on a balcony—she didn't get a chance to peek below.

There's your precious Shichibi, girl, the demon laughed as the images faded, If you don't keep your promise to me, I promise that every day that you live in that broken promise will be made as miserable as I can make it.

Nariko snapped her eyes open, her heart beating so loudly she could hear the blood pounding in her ears. She was still sitting under the table in the room she had snuck into, her arms hugging herself tightly, and she was trembling. She looked around wildly, and without having to think, she knew the way, she could feel the demon's demonstration imprinted on her mind. Scrambling to her feet she hurried out of the room and started down the halls, breathing heavily. She knew where she was going, and finally, she was going to find out the truth.

For better...? Or for worse...? Who could rightly say?

The very instant Nariko had left from the room where she had somehow called upon the demon, she knew exactly where to go. Even though everything had flashed past her in such quick succession, which would normally be impossible to remember, she knew where to go. She also could remember the location of all those who were near her route, and while she knew they could have moved, she knew roughly where they were, and constantly thought 'hide' to herself.

It took her nearly half an hour to trace the route as quietly as she could, and a person who was moving something down the hall almost found her once. The said something was luckily a large box and Nariko manage to duck into an open doorway without being seen. But all that seemed trivial to the long journey she seemed to be making. By the time she reached the final hallway, she knew she was already quite late in delivering the food to Haruno, but she didn't

want to have to confront him again unless she knew for certain who was right—her, or him, about whether Akatsuki planned on killing her or not.

With trembling hands and shaky legs she walked forwards and reached for the handle of the large door that was the exact same as the one she saw in her head. She pulled, and discovered it was a lot heavier than she had anticipated—it took every ounce of her strength to pull it open. She managed to get it pried open large enough to squeeze through, and when she pushed it close, she let it stand open a brick's width. She had felt that she wasn't supposed to be in this place the instant she had entered, and she didn't want people on the outside seeing the door open, but she didn't want to be trapped if anything on the inside found her. Her biggest fear was that she would be found, and while the word 'hide' pounded in her head just as loudly as her heartbeat was in her ears, she couldn't help but feel nervous.

Creeping away from the door, she crossed the large balcony to get a good look of the room. She knew that she must be near the top of the mountain, just like she had suspected in the vision, because the balcony opened up to a large basin below, which she had yet to go over and examine. She could see other balconies along the walls, but some of them were crumbled and dangerous-looking, while in other places there was a bit of crumbled wall and a lone gaping hole where the door and balcony should have been. Some times it was hard to see how much some of the balconies had gone to ruin, because of the poor light, a pale blue shifting glow was the only light source. Having observed that, Nariko chose very careful footing as crept along the threshold of the ledge, making her way over to the stone lip, which served as a railing, so that she could gaze down.

The first thing she saw when she drew near to the lip was the large disfigured rock form of what appeared to be a sort of head. It was all Nariko could do to keep from screaming upon first sight; the instant she had pulled her head over the lid, she saw the rock form, and nine eyes on the statue, all of them wide and staring, one of which

was staring directly at her. Not all of the eyes had pupils, only four of them did, but it was still rather intimidating, if not altogether terrifying. There was a stream of blue pouring into the mouth of the head, but she tried not to look at the head, as it unnerved her. She quickly averted her eyes from the gaze of the giant one staring at her, and looked beyond it below.

Coming out of the ground were two gigantic hands that were linked together by handcuffs, and judging by the size of them, and the position of them, they were meant to be part of the rest of the statue. The fingers were raised upwards, positioned liked they were reaching up to catch something that was floating downwards, and upon each of the fingertips Nariko could see some things positioned on top. They were people, she realized, and upon squinting, she could see that they were the different members of Akatsuki. She picked out each person by shape, and the rest could be figured out by guessing. She could see the form of the Leader on the thumb of the right hand, followed by Deidara, and then Flower-chan; the next person looked like Itachi, and Zetsu definitely was next. On the left hand, there was nobody standing on the top of the smallest finger, but she could make out Kisame's strange hair on the next finger, and Kakazu's slouching form after that. The large three-bladed scythe gave away that the person on the index finger had to be Hidan, and that left the last person as Tobi.

All of them seemed to be deep in concentration, as nobody even seemed to notice she was there—sometimes they just seemed to know she was there, when she wasn't thinking about hiding. Nobody moved either, they were all standing upright and tall, their hands folded in front of them, but it seemed that all of them were present, which was the most important thing. That meant that the Shichibi had to be nearby, because what else could all of Akatsuki be doing here?

And then there was that pale blue light that was coming from somewhere. It was in front of the statue, and the one hand blocked her view of what was creating the source of light that was feeding a

blue stream and purple stream into the mouth of the frightening-looking head. The Shichibi's host wasn't with the rest of them, he had to be near the blue light, maybe that's what was causing the light—the Shichibi. Creeping over as far to the edge of the balcony as she could, she still couldn't see much, just what seemed to be a foot floating in suspended in the middle of the blue light. All at once, Nariko felt terrified and relieved at the same time, yet she knew that she couldn't leave without satisfying the nagging fear in her to make sure that the Shichibi was all right.

Looking around nervously, she tried to think of ways that she could get a better look. The next balcony was too far away for her to be able to try and figure out how to get there, but if she could just move over just a little bit, she could maybe see it. Or if she was taller... Taller...? She looked at the stone lip of the balcony and then looked down below, it was so far down, yet, if she was careful, and it was about half a foot wide... With her ever-increasing nervousness, she found that her hearing was getting sharper, and her reflexes sharper—or it was her imagination and the adrenaline flowing through her? Either way, she began to feel pressured for time. She had to get out of here quickly, she didn't have time to hang around, so she had to get her answers and leave. Without letting her thoughts and doubts getting in the way, she put her hands on the edge, and hoisted herself up on top.

The instant Nariko managed to get a clear view of the figure floating in the blue light, her eyes opened wide, as wide as they possibly could go. The figure was not close enough for her to see any details, but she could tell that it was the host of the Shichibi floating in the blue light, and a sudden sickness engulfed her, and she felt her head get dizzy and she almost fell off the edge. The body was contorted horribly, the back arched back to an impossible degree, the limbs all bent back as well. Bits of the purple light was flowing out of the mouth of the body and leaving, up towards the mouth of the statue. Even though it was hard to see, Nariko knew that the eyes were open, and the mouth was formed in a long-silenced scream.

Cold dread seized her, the sickness coming up all of a sudden, and the dizziness grew too. The edges of her vision became fuzzy and her ears started to hear funny, everything sounded slightly muffled. She felt something flicker inside her stomach, and then she snapped, she leapt down from the edge back onto the balcony and tore across the stone floor towards the door. Her mind was screaming more than just 'hide' it was screaming things like: 'don't let them ever find me' and 'disappear'. She opened the door much faster than she did before and then bolted down the hallway, the demon becoming more and more riled with each step; she was fighting it down, trying to hide it, because they knew—they knew when the demon was trying to keep her safe.

He was right, Haruno was right—they were going to kill her. Taking them demon did take her life from her, horribly and painfully. Running as fast as she could, she took different turns and corners, just running for the sake of running, not focusing on a direction, just trying to get as far away from Akatsuki and the others, and that horrible statue. And when she finally collapsed, exhausted, in a deserted hall, lined with tiny windows to the outside cliff face, she threw open the window and vomited.

When she had effectively emptied her insides she closed the window and sunk to the floor, her back against the wall. Her heart was still pounding, but her head had cleared significantly. Haruno was right, they were going to kill her; all their kindness, that was all nothing, it was all fake, lies. She did not cry, her eyes were completely dry, but she felt so empty. She felt like there was an emptiness inside her, like everything had been hollowed out, except for... Nariko put her hand on her stomach. Except for the demon, it was still inside her hollow self, like a rock in an empty jar.

So what was she going to do now? She knew that they were going to kill her, but she didn't have anywhere to run. They had found her in her dark room in her village before, where hardly anybody would have known about her... They would find her again, and she had nowhere to go. Nobody would accept her because of her demon, so

what would she do? She didn't want to be alone anymore, yet that was all that awaited her. Yet she couldn't trust Akatsuki anymore, she couldn't trust Flower-chan, or Itachi... It hurt a lot.

A sudden overwhelming anger took her then. She would not let them have their way, there had to be something she could do, there had to be something or some way that she could stop them, or at least stop something that was wrong. And then an idea struck her, a notion, an almost crazy idea, but she didn't care. She felt so betrayed—she knew what she had to do. Getting to her feet she clenched her hands into fists, and then stormed down the hallway. She could feel the demon flicking its awareness through her body, agitated from the encounter, and now uncertain of what she was doing. She slapped her stomach once in retaliation—which did nothing to silence it—and left. In her haste, she hadn't realized that the white origami daisy that she made had fallen out of her pocket when she sat down, and now it was left behind, crushed, and stained with corruption.

A/N: BAH! It took me a whole month to get this written, and I must say that I am thoroughly disgusted with myself. This segment isn't even done, it'll carry over into the next chapter, but only for the first part. Then we get to go back to magical Konoha and experience lots of...youth? :p Though it's fall there, not springtime. Okay, I'm just going to stop talking now. Note on the statue. Yes, I am aware that they probably had more captured by that point, seeing as this is a deviation off of the main story, BUT I'm using my artistic license (for once) which allows me to remove some Bijuu from the statue for the purpose of this story. Bijuu currently in the statue include: Ichibi, Yonbi, Gobi, and now Shichibi. That leaves Nibi, Sanbi, Hachibi, and Kyuubi, seeing as they already sort have Rokubi in Nariko. I hope that clears up any questions that would have arisen.

Chapter 46

A/N: Well, for those of you who loved the last chapter, thanks, I feel touched. For those of you who didn't like it. Sorry about that, but I'm glad that you're being honest at least. Someone commented that Sasuke and Sakura's relationship seemed to be getting a little stale...yeah, it is kinda. But depressed Sakura is really hard to work with. So, I'm glad that's gotten out of there. Plus, lack of inspiration recently has been slowing me down quite noticeably. (Will finish though!) Also, all last weekend I read Vampire Knight instead of writing (shot). But it's really good!!

On another note. Chapter 402, anyone? It...frustrates me. Because not only is Sasuke going about things the wrong way (again), but this makes chances of SasuSaku go downhill faster than a mining cart full of lead bars, and increases Sasuke's chance of dying exponentially. Won't be too specific here for people who haven't read it, but the last speech bubble on the last page made me let out an involuntary screech. I thought the chapter ended at "Konoha must —", and then I scrolled down....yeah. My second reaction was: "Sasuke, don't use that! It damages your vision!" FAIL, on my part. :p Then there was much angsting, and then I went and visited my editor and we wallowed in the angst. And here I thought that Sasuke would FINALLY get it... (smacks him for being stupid)

In other news, due to the recent Naruto chapter, I seem to have lost my ability to hate Itachi with a burning passionate hatred, and this story will need some tweaking in version 2.0. For those of you who want me to keep evil Itachi, don't worry, I am, but there will be a logical (and eventual) explanation for his evilness. The plot of the (eventual) sequel, relies on the answers to the questions that everyone had about the Uchiha Clan. The way the manga is going is actually playing in my favour. And I'm just going to stop talking now before I give away more than I intend to (I'm prone to doing that late at night).

p.s. Hard Knox is 'the University of Life'. (Kakashi must get lost on Campus a lot.)

EDIT 06/14/08: Fixed the really awkward wording... Didn't even cross my mind until some people pointed it out. x.x

Chapter Forty-Six: Hard Knox

All the emotions that Nariko had been feeling since she had seen the Shichibi's dead body afloat in the blue light had caught her up in a storm. They were like the winds of a cyclone churning within her, her gentle and quiet self mired in the negative and the dangerous, swirling around inside, trapped in the eye, sometimes grazed by the other emotions, damaging the virtues of herself. She strode down the cavernous tunnels faster than she had ever moved down them before, yet she was not running, and she was not short on breath.

Her feet carried her down, down, down to the depths of the mountain, down to its very roots. It had not been more than a few minutes since she had left, but already she found herself down where she needed to be. The demon was squirming around in her stomach, and while she was thinking 'hide' to herself, she knew it wouldn't do much good for much longer.

The windows in the doors of the cells loomed out darkly as she flitted past them, and she let her mind dwell on them, knowing that she was lucky not to be behind one of those doors, so much more fortunate that the host of the Shichibi had been, or Haruno. They would probably kill Haruno too, once they'd gotten all the information they needed out of him, and she thought of his family, and how they would never see him again. When she had first met Haruno, they had told her that he was dangerous and not to be trusted, but as she learned about him and discovered the truth, she learned that Akatsuki was destroying his family. Why had she ever trusted them?

When she arrived at her final destination, she could feel her thoughts of 'hide' slip away as it lost its affect—the demon was too riled to contain anymore. Nariko found that she had ceased to care though; she was far enough away from the room where the sealing was being held, and even though they seemed to know when her demon was agitated, it would take them time to get to her, and by then it would be too late.

The demon was feeding strength to her limbs, she could feel the chakra pumping through her, coursing through her arms and legs; they felt like they were on fire. But the strength that would have normally frightened her was now something that she allowed herself to get caught in; she was going to use this strength. And with the new power coursing through her, she seized the handle of the door that stood before her and pushed with all of that given power. The door was still locked, and it resisted, but shortly afterwards, failed. Concrete crumbled away from the frame and light spilled into the dark room, lighting up the blood-red marks on the floor, the white seals standing out against the grey concrete.

Haruno who had been sitting in the dark raised a hand to his eyes, shielding them from the light of the hall, but it was evident that he had been watching the door before. Without missing a beat, Nariko entered the room and approached the paper seal in the center of a ring of the red writing, and with one swipe of her fingernails, she shredded it. But that was not where she stopped, she took the water from Haruno's tray from earlier and poured them on the marks, and then strode over to where he was. He was watching her carefully, but not fearfully, the blank expression on his face dimming the fear in her slightly—he was not afraid of her as she was now. She took the chains that bound his arms and with her bare hands she snapped them with ease; she took the keys from her pockets and tossed them to him.

"Go!" she shouted at him, her voice loud and penetrating in the thick silence.

Slowly he rose to his feet, rubbing his wrists, and looking down at her, he merely stood, not leaving.

"Go!" she repeated, his face going blurry in her vision, as her eyes proceeded to fill with tears, "Go now! You were right, they are going to kill me, and they'll kill you too if you don't go now!"

His face became a saddened frown as he looked down at her, "What about you, little Rokubi?"

"Don't worry about me! Just go home to your family! Protect them!" she screamed, her throat burning with the strain on her vocal cords.

Still he did not move, but just stood there, and she felt her control break. Her shoulders started to shake, and her tears spilled over, streaking down her face. A sob built itself in her, and she shattered, all her tears and fright coming out at once. She sank to the floor, crying; every hurt that she had ever felt, every sadness she had held inside all came pouring out. It was the first time she had cried since she came to the mountain of the Akatsuki.

Haruno still stood there. "Why don't you go?! If you don't leave, they'll find you, and then they'll kill you for sure this time."

She was staring at the floor, and even that wasn't all that visible amid her tears. There was a pause, and then slowly he crouched down beside her, and put a hand on her shoulder, and waited until she was quiet. It was after her crying had stopped and she was reduced to hiccups that she wiped her eyes clear of tears.

"Come with me," he said kindly, his voice quiet.

Nariko merely shook her head, wiping her nose on the sleeve on her Akatsuki cloak, "No. I'm not going to run."

"Why? Why are you going to stay here when you know that they're going to kill you?" he asked her, his voice confused.

She looked up at him, much calmer, the demon still squirming in her stomach, but she was no longer afraid. She smiled sadly, "Because my entire life, this is the only place where I've been treated kindly."

He looked at her despairingly. "Even though you know that kindness is a lie, you're still going to stay?" he asked exasperatedly.

She nodded slowly and wiped her nose again, "Go now. They'll be here soon. Go before it's too late."

He paused uncertainly, and she knew he was hesitating, but after a few seconds the sounds of voices could be heard, and footfalls were approaching. He gave her one last sympathetic look, and then he removed his hand from her shoulder, moving it behind her head.

"This is so you won't get in trouble for letting me go," he told her quietly, "Thank you, Nariko. I won't forget you or what you've done for me."

There was a sharp pain in the back of Nariko's neck and then she felt the world go black, her last conscious memory was of seeing Haruno run out the door and see the blood marks on the floor dissolving in the pool of water on the floor.

By the time that Akatsuki arrived down to the cell of Haruno Kisho, the damage had been done. The instant that the Leader realized that the prisoner had escaped, he took Zetsu, Kisame, Hidan and Kakuzu in pursuit, leaving Konan, Deidara, Tobi, and Itachi behind to investigate the scene. What they found inside was Nariko's unconscious body, a pool of water, which had utterly destroyed Hidan's markings, a torn seal, and the lock on the door absolutely demolished.

Itachi stood in the doorway in absolute surprise, even though none of it showed on his face, while Konan rushed over to Nariko's unconscious body to find out her condition. Deidara was examining the torn seal while Tobi crouched next to him, holding the cup that

most undoubtedly held the water. Walking over to where Konan was reviving Nariko with some medical ninjutsu, he knelt down beside the azure-haired woman and the petite girl.

Her eyes fluttered open, and upon looking up at the two of them, her eyes filled with tears.

"Nariko, what happened?" Itachi asked her, his Sharingan studying her with scrutiny.

She sat up and looked at the scene around her and then looked at the two Akatsuki members beside her, "I... I tore the seal—I tried to be careful...but I...I stepped on it...and it...tore. I'm...I'm so sorry, Itachi-sama!"

She buried her face in her hands, the tears dripping out between her fingers as she cried. Itachi exchanged glances with Konan who looked deathly serious; the both of them were probably thinking the same thing at that moment, both were judging the wisdom of entrusting the task to Nariko.

"What's done is done," Konan said to him, rather than Nariko, "We can only hope that the others catch him."

Nariko started to shake harder as she cried. "I'm...so...sorry," she choked out over and over again, between her sobs.

"It fits, the instant that seal was torn he would have been able to use his chakra again, un," Deidara said grimly, "Aren't the Haruno renown for their brute strength?"

Itachi nodded mutely, he was studying the room, his eyes passing over the broken chains, the shackles, the pool of water, which was spreading slowly across the floor, the cup in Tobi's hand, the broken concrete where the door had been forced open. The chakra that had called them all was undoubtedly a result of Nariko's alarm of being attacked by Haruno the instant the accident happened. He looked down at Nariko again who was sitting with her hands in her lap, and

she was no longer crying, but still shaking severely. There was something off, he didn't know what, but he could sense it.

"He didn't hurt you when he escaped, did he, Kit?" Konan asked concernedly, and Nariko shook her head mutely.

"He managed to get your keys though, yeah," Deidara pointed out, pointing at the discarded bits of metal on the ground.

"He had...already hit my head before he took them..." Nariko murmured; Itachi was studying her face carefully; trying to pinpoint what he found was off. He had sensed the demon's chakra signature go berserk in this area of the mountain around the same time the rest of the Akatsuki had. The sealing had been completed, and when all of them regained their senses again, they had been immediately alerted to her demon's spiraling out of control wrath. It had been the strongest he had ever sensed since he had become acquainted with Nariko. Despite their exhaustion, all of them had come immediately.

"Tobi is glad that you're okay, Nariko-chan!" Tobi said enthusiastically, and Nariko only nodded.

"I suppose we should be glad that he didn't figure out who she was, and try and take her with him, or kill her," Konan said bitterly, rising to her feet. She offered her hand to the small girl, who after a moment took it, rising as well.

Itachi nodded in agreement, still studying the girl. Her face was very ashen, and fear was etched clearly across it. Narrowing his eyes slightly, he tried to detect anything that would indicate that she was lying, though it was hard to say. Her normal behaviour often involved avoided eye contact and her fear was very understandable; Nariko was like Konan had said, she hadn't developed the corrupt adult mind that the rest of them had. He concluded that Nariko must be sincere.

"Come on, everyone," Konan said wearily, "We've been at work for three days, I think we're all tired. Kit, let's get you taken care of, and

then you should go to bed."

Itachi glanced around the room once more as Konan led Nariko out of the room, followed by Deidara and Tobi. Dismissing all suspicions he had about something being off, he followed suit. It was a good thing: for if he had lingered much longer, he would have realized that the food bowls were empty, and the reason Nariko had been down there wasn't because she was bringing Haruno food at all...

It had been three days since Sasuke had found out who was Anko's prime student in the arte of the katana, and while not much time had passed, already Sasuke felt that he had made progress. The first day, Kanaye had merely fought him in order to determine how well he used his katana already, only after he reluctantly attacking his temporary pupil. It had taken a few reluctant first strikes combined with some brutal retaliation on Sasuke's part to convince the older Haruno sibling that he need not hold back. After that, things had gone smoothly, and it had been the first time, since Sasuke had developed his chakra senses, that he had lost at something. Kanaye was skilled, Sasuke would admit.

The second day had played out much the same, except Kanaye had corrected him on a number of things such as posture, grip, and a little on stance too. Sasuke had aimed to win one match that day, but he had failed. He found that while his chakra senses provided him with insight on attacks that he would not normally be able to see, it only worked for long-range attacks. He could sense behind him at close range, but if he lacked the speed and skill to retaliate quickly, sensing the attack was all he could do about it. Also, close range attacks were quick and required skill to be executed, so without the Sharingan to read movements precognitively, he had to use his knowledge to read Kanaye's moves.

As for today, Sasuke hadn't seen anyone for training yet, as it was still early; ten o'clock by his count, though with the fact that he usually couldn't see the readings of most clocks, he relied mostly on estimation. Or Sakura. But Sakura was not present at the moment,

having been stolen away by Ino. That seemed to be happening at an increasing frequency since Ino had found out about Sakura's father, and the pushy kunoichi seemed hell-bent on spending as much time with his rose-haired kunoichi as possible.

...He had just used Sakura in the same sentence of a possessive-tensed word, he realized. He mentally berated himself for a moment, before arriving at a rationalization in which he told himself that he had meant it in the same sense as if he had said Team Seven's kunoichi. Nothing more than a loose use of the word 'his'.

Aside from that slip in his thoughts, Sasuke found that things with Sakura were going pretty well, all things considered. There hadn't been much of a change in her mood, and after concernedly questioning her about it, she informed him some medications could take a couple of months to take effect, but assured him that the type of anti-depressants she had been prescribed would be in full effect by three weeks at the very most. But despite the present effects it was having on her, she was starting to get organized again. Chores were done in the natural order she had done them before, instead of whatever haphazard succession she could think of in order to keep herself distracted. He had caught her humming as she prepared breakfast the other day, which he had found soothing as well as relieving. He was feeling quite proud of himself in regards to tidying up the whole mess, especially because of his qualification on handling situations such as this.

As for his eyesight, it was improving at a rapid rate it seemed. It was still not good enough to rely on outside the home, but it was at a point where he no longer just saw the splashes of grey moving across his vision. He could see figures traveling back and forth, matching the movements of the signatures he detected. However, as of yet, he still couldn't see colours, and at night, he was still afflicted with what Sakura had called 'night blindness'. Other than that the vitamin A supplements were supposed to help, he didn't really know much about what it actually was, but he knew Sakura was trying to find the best way to overcome it.

On the whole, things seemed to have taken a turn for the better, and maybe things could be normal again...as normal as they could get if comparing to his life post-being brought from Konoha. Things could never return to the way they were before he left Konoha, but in a way, things were almost better than they were then.

It's ironic how things turn out... When I had my vision, I was blind. And it's only now that I've lost my sight that I can clearly see the things that should have been important to me.

He pushed the thoughts aside; not because he didn't acknowledge the truth to it, but because he didn't want to think about it now. He moved his thoughts back to Sakura.

In the light of Sakura's absence that morning, he found himself once again with plenty of free time to train, as it was still relatively early, and he did not need to meet Kanaye or Anko for some time yet. Kanaye had expressed that he thought Anko may be able to come train him today; in addition to that information, Kanaye also dropped some very broad hints on his desire to be told how Sasuke managed to see. He supposed he might as well explain, but no matter, he was already in the process of doing something with his current free time.

He was walking with his hands in his pockets towards the third training ground, but not for the purposes of raining. No, there was something near the third training ground that Sasuke was headed for, where he was certain he would meet someone, and until then, he'd just have to wait. His feet carried him out of the village, and back where the training grounds resided. He still caught the attention of many people as he left, as they would all cast rather obvious stares at him. A young man walking around with his eyes shut, and without damaging himself in the process, was something that wasn't seen all that often; Sasuke was glad once he had walked out of the general populated areas, because there were fewer people then.

It was as he was walking through the various grounds that two signature came within his range. The one was very familiar, the other was a stranger to him—the recognizable one belonged to Neji, that

much was certain, and if he kept traveling in his current direction, he would definitely cross paths with them. Sasuke smirked to himself, this was quite a bit of luck, he had wanted to speak to Neji for a while, but he had been uncertain if the Hyuuga prodigy had returned from the mission he had been assigned.

A few minutes later, he came across the pair, both of which were deep in a sparing match. Neji was in fact one of the people present—Sasuke was never wrong when it came to his senses—and the other one turned out to be the kunoichi of Maito Gai's team, the one who he kept forgetting the name of—Ming Ming or something like that. The fight was definitely one worth watching, as all number of weapons were being hurled towards Neji, courtesy of the nimble kunoichi, while the jounin deflected each one with ease. Sasuke took a place under a tree and leaned back against it, his arms crossed, watching until Neji called it a match. There was no clear victor.

"Uchiha," Neji called in acknowledgement, "I wasn't expecting you to be an audience for our sparing match this morning."

"Good morning, Sasuke-san!" the kunoichi with the two buns waved; she could remember his name, so why couldn't he remember hers, he thought sourly.

Sasuke took both greetings as a sign that he could approach them, so he did so, uncrossing his arms and putting his hands back in his pockets.

"I assume you want to speak with one of us, otherwise you most likely would have been on your way," Neji said tonelessly as the blind Uchiha came within speaking range.

"I did," Sasuke replied, "But I wasn't expecting to meet you out here. I was on my way elsewhere when I sensed your presence."

"What did you wish to speak to me about?" Neji asked, crossing his arms casually over his chest, "I don't think Ten Ten is the one you wish to speak to today."

Ten Ten—that was her name. He had trouble remembering Naruto's girlfriend's name alone, so he doubted if he would be able to keep this girl's name in his head for very long.

Sasuke shook his head and then commented simply, "The Chuunin Exams are coming at the end of December. Because I left Konoha as a genin, I am still considered that rank, regardless of what experience or skills I possess now. In order to become a Chuunin and treated as such, I have to take the exam. I would like you to assist training me, if possible."

The weapon's mistress and the Hyuuga prodigy looked at one another before Neji turned his gaze back to Sasuke, "I have already offered my assistance to Ten Ten who is currently preparing for—"

"No, Neji, it's okay. If Sasuke-san needs your help training, go ahead. He's still a genin after all," Ten Ten argued, shaking her head, "He needs to pass the Chuunin Exam more than I need to pass the Jounin Exam."

"That's not necessarily true, Ten Ten," Neji replied with a slight frown on his face, "You've worked hard so far. The Exam is in February, and it is a difficult one to pass. If you stop now, you most likely won't be prepared for it. You might have to forgo signing up entirely."

The girl gave a sort of crooked smile, "Neji, you have this tendency to jump to elaborate conclusions. I never said I wasn't going to continue training. I'll train with Lee or something whenever you can't—even though you're going to help Sasuke-san, that doesn't mean every hour of every day, right?"

"No, I suppose it doesn't," the Hyuuga agreed, closing his eyes contemplatively, "Very well then, I will be willing to instruct you, Uchiha."

"Thank you," Sasuke said in acknowledgment, "So that it that it doesn't inconvenience you, I will train with you at times that are best suited to your schedule."

"Very well, I will find a way to let you know when and where I will meet you."

"Would you like to train with us now, Sasuke-san?" the girl named Ten Ten inquired, smiling at him in a friendly manner.

He shook his head no, "As I mentioned before, I was on my way elsewhere when I ran into you both."

"Alright, see you around then," Ten Ten said brightly, waving at him again.

Neji and Sasuke exchanged acknowledging nods before Sasuke turned to continue walking the direction he had been going initially. It was as he was walking away, he heard Ten Ten say something to Neji when she probably thought he was out of earshot.

"He's a lot politer than he used to be."

A short period of time later, Sasuke found himself just outside the area that was designated as Training Ground Three. It was as he reached the vanity, that he became focused on a particular structure that his senses picked up. It wasn't very large, it only came up to his waist, maybe, but it was the thing he was looking for. It was a carved rock, one that had hundreds of characters carved into the front of it: names of shinobi that had fallen while on missions.

He was the only one there, but he knew there was someone who visited this place every day, and if he waited, he knew that Hatake Kakashi would definitely appear. Walking forwards, he stepped up onto the dais, approaching the stone, his senses scanning the grooves meticulously. Countless names were etched across it, the intricate kanji and kana carved deep into the stone surface. His mind touched on the different names that he read, wondering about those who had lost their lives for the village. There were a few Uchiha names written on it—Uchiha Kyouhei, Uchiha Ayumi, Uchiha Obito... But those were the names of Uchiha who had died outside the village, before the rest of the clan. Nobody who had died the night of

the tragedy had their name written here, as they had all died in the village, and were not killed in action.

What name did Kakashi come here for, Sasuke wondered, as he finished studying the names, or were their multiple people that he came here for? He remembered Kakashi telling him that none of his comrades were still alive; were they all here, nothing left of them but these names in stone?

"Well, well, who have we here?" came a familiar lazy voice, from behind Sasuke; the signature had been within his awareness for a while, but Sasuke hadn't worried much about it, knowing that it would inevitably come here—it was a given.

Sasuke turned his head slightly to the side so that his ear was towards Kakashi, who was perched on a sturdy branch in the tree behind him, acknowledging his presence. The Jounin leapt down to the ground, a few meters from where Sasuke was crouched on the dais, his hands in his pockets, the issue of Icha Icha unusually absent from view.

"I must admit, I wasn't expecting to see you here," Kakashi said calmly, walking forwards, "I can't imagine why you'd be here."

Sasuke said nothing at first, but turned his head towards the stone again, his senses scanning over the names again, "I had a feeling you would stumble across this place after getting lost on the road of life today."

Behind him, Kakashi gave a little nod, and there was a quiet pause. Sasuke knew that Kakashi had the answer to the question, but neither pressed the issue for the moment. Sasuke's mind didn't want to discuss training at the moment, there was something about the silence that forbade him from wanting to, it was a sacred moment in memory of the dead, right now was not the time for light discussion.

"The person who you come here to remember, which name belonged to them?" Sasuke asked after a moment; he didn't expect

Kakashi to answer, Kakashi was like him in that respect, and so he was a bit taken by surprise when the Jounin did answer.

"A number of years ago, I lost my teammate, rival, and close friend on the first mission that I ever led as a Jounin. His name was Uchiha Obito," Kakashi said solemnly, the wind rustling through the trees almost muting the man's voice, but it did not hide his regret.

Sasuke felt mildly surprised by this, he knew that Kakashi had the single Sharingan eye, but he didn't know that he had actually been very well acquainted with any Uchiha. "I see," he mumbled quietly, he realized how little he knew about his teacher's old team.

"I blame only myself for what happened," Kakashi said with a dismissive sigh, "Blinded by my stupidity and arrogance, I failed to see the value of my own comrades. I learned the hard way, and too late, the importance of my friends—I paid for it too."

"What happened to the rest of your team?" Sasuke asked turning towards Kakashi, opening his eyes. He could see the figure of the man standing beside him, looking down at the stone.

"Well, my sensei became the Fourth Hokage, and as for the other member of my team..." Kakashi turned his head skywards, looking up at the clouds, which now Sasuke could just make out with his improving vision, "She had been kidnapped by the enemy during the Ninja Wars, and I wanted to leave her behind to complete our mission. Obito ran off on his own, against my orders, to save her and by the time I caught up, the events that led to his death were already set in motion. After we returned home to Konoha, and the initial shock of his death wore off for her, and she found out what really happened, well.... Rin never forgave me."

It was hard for Sasuke to fathom the fact that Kakashi had willingly ordered a team member left behind. To think that Kakashi had been so callous about his teammates as he had been until recently, it was hard to believe. And yet it made him able to see why the man valued his teams so much now, because of his previous loss. Sakura's

father had been on his team on the rescue mission of Jiraiya of the Sannin, and Sasuke knew without a doubt that Sakura's father was only MIA because there had been no other choice.

Kakashi raised a hand to his face and scratched his cheek idly with his index finger, "She refused to talk to me or even look at me. Just by the amount she had to do with me, I might as well be dead to her, and she to me. I don't know what she's up to right now, or even where she is, though I think she's a member of ANBU in a foreign outpost. Just a guess...ah, well. I don't really blame her for not forgiving me. It was my fault."

Sasuke didn't say anything; he felt his mouth firm into a hard line, and his mood go grim. He couldn't argue with Kakashi's statement of blame, because he hadn't been there. He was being hard on himself, but then again, would he have felt any different if he had been in Kakashi's place? The wind blew over the both of them, clearing the silence away briefly.

"We're not much a team now are we?" Kakashi asked, turning his head towards the Uchiha, and for some reason, Sasuke felt that he was smiling, "But you got the second chance that I never did—your comrades are still alive, and they still care about you, I think I can trust you to take care of Naruto and Sakura for me, right, Sasuke?"

"Yeah," Sasuke muttered hoarsely, "I will."

There was another pause.

"Do you think that they'll be adding Sakura's father's name to this stone?" he asked after an uncertain pause.

"I don't know. There's usually a three month wait before the status is changed to 'missing, presumed dead,' and then another three months before they're considered dead," Kakashi said speculatively, "Haruno Kisho's a pretty resourceful man, and a tough one too—Sakura gets it from him—but if he doesn't show up in the next six months, yeah, he'll be added to the list."

"I see," Sasuke said acrimoniously.

"How's she taking it by the way?"

"Not well, but she's getting better. She'll be okay," Sasuke replied, noting bitterly that depressing conversations seemed to follow him everywhere.

"You've really changed, Sasuke," Kakashi remarked after a moment's pause.

"So I've been told."

More silence; Sasuke closed his eyes again and activated his senses, the wind beginning to dry out his eyes.

"Jaa, well, I think I'm going to head off again, so if you wanted to speak to me, I suggest you do it now," Kakashi said, reaching to a pocket in his vest, and pulling out a familiar looking book.

Sasuke stood up as well, pocketing his hands, "I wanted to ask you if you'd be willing to train with me for the Chuunin Exam as we once did three years ago."

Kakashi's visible eyebrow rose slightly, and then the corner of his eye crinkled in a hidden smile. The man closed his eyes and gave a small chuckle, "Alright, for old times' sake. I'll meet you here tomorrow at seven o'clock in the evening, okay?"

"Don't be late," Sasuke stated bluntly, knowing that it was probably a futile attempt.

"I don't think it's possible—you've expressed that you can only find this place by getting lost on the road of life, so I can't possibly be late by getting lost," Kakashi said with a smile, "Jaa, ashita, ne?"

He raised his hand in a small wave and disappeared in a cloud of smoke, leaving Sasuke behind alone on the dais. The Uchiha turned

his attention to the stone, though outwardly he didn't move. The name Uchiha Obito was blazoned firmly in his mind.

"Come on, Uchiha! Put your back into it!" Anko barked, nimbly evading one of Sasuke's strikes with his katana.

Sasuke just managed to leap out of striking range before Anko counter attacked with a quick wrist movement. If only he had the Sharingan, then he could have easily copied the technique and added it to his maneuvers. He was finding training difficult, as he had to unlearn all the mistakes he had copied with the Sharingan—and relearning without the Sharingan was not an easy task. Albeit the mistakes were few, but it was crucial to correct them in time for the exam.

"I can feel you're not putting your full potential into it!" Anko snapped, "Come on, you're holding back on me!"

Sasuke inwardly insisted that he wasn't holding back, as he was forced to leap backwards about a yard to avoid another incoming blow. He wasn't holding back as far as skill went, but he was definitely holding back in implementing special techniques he had developed in correlation with his katana. He did not think it would be particularly fair if he suddenly charged the blade with the Chidori, or if he implemented Chidori Nagashi. It was obvious that Anko was better at him in skill, but he had a feeling that if he did apply any of his elemental chakra that he would immediately gain the upper hand, but effectively defeat the purpose of his training.

"Don't run! That is rule number one! Your blade is almost useless going backwards!" Anko reprimanded him for jumping out of her reach.

Anko's fighting style was definitely offensive, she didn't give her enemies a chance to pause and think—she thought on her feet, a useful skill. Her footwork was perfect, she left nothing open long

enough to be taken advantage off, and she had an almost berserker-like approach to her tactic.

"Come at me, Uchiha," Anko ordered, "That's not a request."

Like he hadn't already tried? Frustrated, he thought he might as well, even if it was a pointless attempt. He had been fighting defensively because Anko really knew what she was doing, and he wasn't about to lose in thirty seconds flat in front of Kanaye who had been watching from the sides all the time. Anko had only arrived towards the end of the training session with Kanaye, because she was short on spare time, only able to test him towards the end of today's lesson.

The fight had been going for about five minutes now, most of which had been running on Sasuke's part, as he tried not to lose an ear. He figured if he lost now, it would be with enough dignity that Kanaye wouldn't dare laugh. Lunging forwards, he sent the blade out first, only to have metal meet with metal as Anko's katana blocked his. Kusanagi was really useful in this regard he thought blithely.

Anko's face was right in front of his, their blades crossed right below their chins; she was giving him a determined look, one that she probably wouldn't have made if she realized he could sense her expression in front of him. Then her lip curled into a mischievous smile, Sasuke paused, frowned and then before he knew what was happening, she head butted him.

"That's a match!" she shouted triumphantly, as Sasuke stumbled back, dazed; so much for losing with dignity, he could hear Kanaye laughing.

"What. The. Hell?" Sasuke snarled, rubbing his forehead angrily, the pain subsiding a little.

"Your opponent might not always attack with a blade, you do realize," Anko said with a reprimand, like she was disappointed that he failed to think of it, "An opening is an opening, basic shinobi training

dictates that. And don't think that shinobi principle doesn't apply when you're using a weapon. You should keep all openings covered or at least watch them so you can react the instant your opponent does something...funny."

"Funny," Sasuke grumbled sarcastically.

She just grinned broadly at him. "I thought so, at least," she said lightly, and then turned to Kanaye, "Oi, you, quit laughing."

"Yes, Anko-senpai," Kanaye said, his laughter dying and his voice deadpanning, but Sasuke could tell he was trying not to laugh.

"Naw, I'm just kidding with you, Uchiha," Anko commented, turning back to him, "You're actually a lot better than you probably gave yourself credit for. I know in a serious fight I wouldn't want to cross blades with you, but I know that if I had to, I'd take advantage of your careless mistakes. And I can guarantee, that in the Chuunin Exam that someone is going to do that if we can't get them cleaned up before then."

"I don't know, senpai, he has the weirdest technique that I've ever seen," Kanaye said with a grin, "I don't see how you managed not to laugh when you fought him."

"That's because, Kanaye-kohai, that everything normal is strange in your eyes," Anko retorted, "Now, quick goofing off."

"Fine, fine. I agree, he's not all that bad, but he did still lose horribly—sorry Emo Prince, I'm never going to let that die. Not many people have bragging right to saying that they've kicked an Uchiha's ass," Kanaye grinned, "But to be honest, you only lost because I'm meaner than Anko-senpai—I took advantage of your stupid mistakes."

Sasuke grumbled quietly to himself, but that statement in itself had taught him something, he knew that those mistakes *had* been costing him. If those flaws were the reason he lost to Kanaye, he'd

have to definitely clean those up. And he had a feeling he'd be forced to clean it up, or he might as well hand more bragging rights to Sakura's older brother.

"Well, you be sure to iron those out, when I'm gone," Anko said, putting her hands on her hips, "But I'll be able to take over for the rest of this week. You're on call for now, alright, Haruno?"

Kanaye pulled a ridiculous salute, "Yes, Anko-senpai, ma'am!"

"Anyways, I've got an hour of free time, might as well treat my two pupils to something," Anko said, "Dango, anyone?"

The only problem that Sasuke had with going with Anko and Kanaye for dango was that he did not eat sweet things, and in the nine years it had been since the massacre, he hadn't ingested anything distinctly sweet. The mere taste of high levels of sugars made him feel sick to his stomach, sweet scents were tolerable. It was a simple enough to assume that he wasn't going to have any dango; which, of course, he didn't. However, he still was polite enough to join the other two, sitting across from them while being silent for the most part, but only after insisting that he wasn't going to purchase anything.

There had been some light conversation between Anko and Kanaye who seemed to be pretty well acquainted, though judging by the context of the conversation they didn't get to see each other very often. When the orders of dango arrived, there was a brief silence that followed, but it was only a temporary one before Anko asked the one question that Sasuke knew he would have to answer eventually.

"Well, you've definitely proven that you can hold your ground despite your serious lack of sight," Anko said setting down a skewer down on her plate, "So...how d'you do it?"

Sasuke shut off his senses and observed the two of them as best he could with his poor vision, and slowly and reluctantly began

explaining about how he was able to see using the same type of chakra used for masking signatures in the same manner than Hyuuga used the Byakugan. He went over how Hyuuga Neji had helped him get used to it, and refine it. After a while, he closed his eyes and activated his senses to determine how the two of them would receive this news; he was more concerned that Kanaye would arrive to the same conclusion as the Hokage did—that Sakura didn't need to stay at the Manor anymore—but his face betrayed no such thoughts.

"Very clever," Anko commented, as Sasuke finished his explanation, "Though I suppose we shouldn't have expected any less from a prodigy such as yourself. Sharingan or no Sharingan, you still live up to the title."

"Wait, wait, wait, back up, a sec," Kanaye said, holding up his hands in front of him, in a stopping gesture, "You're saying that you project chakra from every cell in your body on a level that nobody but a few elite ninja can detect, so that you sense everything around you?"

Sasuke would have cast the long-haired jounin an irritated look had he still entirely lacked vision. But as the signals of sight and chakra conflicted in a manner that confused him, he merely donned an annoyed frown, "Yes, that's just what I said."

"Don't your clothes get in the way? Like, don't you receive this... echolocation pulse from your clothes, effectively creating, blind spots?" Kanaye asked, a confused look adorning his face; he seemed unaware of the look he was receiving.

"It seems that when the fabric is close enough to my body, it penetrates it, but anything farther blocks it," Sasuke replied, having not really thought much about it before.

"If these... 'chakra senses'... work the way you say they do, technically you can see over top of the table and below the table at the same time. Isn't that... you know, weird?" Kanaye asked,

seeming phased by this notion, a look of alarmed confusion on his face.

"It was strange at first, but I'm used to it now."

"Okay, I know you attacking me without tripping should be enough proof that you're telling the truth, but one last test," Kanaye said, and then held up his hand, "How many fingers?"

"Four."

The numbers switched to five, "Now?"

"Five," Sasuke stated accurately.

Three fingers dropped away.

"Two," Sasuke answered before he was asked, starting to get a little irritated.

Kanaye then lowered his hand away, and Sasuke thought finally that the older jounin had acquired the ability to realize when he was being irritating—that was what he thought, until half a second later he realized that Kanaye was giving him the finger under the table. Sasuke opened his eyes and glared pointedly at Sakura's brother, who then threw his hands up in defense.

"Sorry! I was just checking!" the man defended, as the splashes of grey that were Haruno Kanaye moved back slightly. Sasuke closed his eyes again, and activated his senses, disgusted with Kanaye's childish behaviour.

"In any case, he can see, which will definitely be enough to get him through the Chuunin Exam," Anko said, crossing her arms and closing her eyes, a impressed smile on her face, "I have a feeling that it'll be the most interesting Exam since Haruno Sakura took the exam."

Kanaye paused and then looked at Anko, "It was out of the country, so I didn't get to go, but I heard about it. Didn't she and her final opponent break up the ground so badly that they had to put the exam on hold for a few days to make it suitable for fighting again?"

Sasuke would have been surprised at one point by this news, but after seeing Sakura hold her own on the mission, he wasn't all that surprised.

"No, actually, she single-handedly destroyed the arena, and part of the base of the viewing platform," Anko said offhandedly, "The whole rest of the exam had to be held in another area because the damage done to the platform made the whole building structurally unsound, and they didn't want anyone getting needlessly hurt. The judges were impressed by the amount of destruction that she could cause only using chakra applied to her limbs, that it would have been unfair not to pass her."

Sasuke's eyebrows went up this time; Kanaye laughed, "Yeah, and I have to *live* with her—or at least I did. Sasuke—piece of advice: don't piss her off."

"But I have a feeling that Sasuke's going to put on an interesting show this year," Anko mused, "I think what we've seen, Kanaye-kohai, is just barely scratching the surface of this Uchiha's true potential."

Several weeks passed, and it was the last week of October when Sakura found Sasuke sitting in the living room by himself, a picture frame in his hand. She had many different lists running through her head at the time, the Chuunin Exam now about a month and a couple weeks away, and she knew it had been weighing on Sasuke's mind a lot recently. So she was both surprised and not that he was sitting in the evening on the couch staring at a picture in his hands. Instantly everything in her mind was shelved by Inner Sakura and she redirected her path so that she was headed towards him.

Slowly she sat down next to him, leaning on his shoulder so she could better peer over it and see the picture. He didn't say anything when she sat down, nor did he say anything when she leaned on him—which was a sign that something was eating at him. She had initially thought it was the picture of Team Seven he was looking at, the one he kept on the night table next to the bed, but when she looked at it, she saw that it wasn't a picture of Team Seven, but a picture of his family.

She didn't say anything either.

Sasuke's parents stood close to one another, while Sasuke himself was standing in front of them. Itachi stood slightly off to the side of his mother, standing slightly farther away from the rest. Sakura had never seen any pictures of Sasuke's parents before, and she took the time now to look at them, comparing their traits to that of their children.

Sasuke's father was standing with his arms crossed, giving the camera a serious look. He had a set jaw and stern eyes, but he did not look unkind. Sasuke's mother was a very beautiful woman, Sakura thought, she had a warm look about her and she struck Sakura as the kind of person who she could have been friends with. Her gaze then fell on Sasuke, who looked no older than seven years old; this must have been the last family photo ever taken of the family before...her eyes turned to Itachi then. Was he already plotting mass murder when that photo was taken?

"What're you thinking about?" she asked Sasuke, who still hadn't said anything.

"I wish I could see them," he said, running his fingers wistfully over the glass, and inadvertently over his parents, "It's better than it was, but...I want to be able to see them again, clearly."

Sakura nodded slowly, wrapping her arms around one of his, "You look like your mom—a lot."

"People used to tell me that," Sasuke replied, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"It's true. You have her eyes, and her mouth too. You smile the same way as her. See? You knew how to smile once," she said, smiling herself.

"That was a long time ago, though," he said, turning his head to look at her.

"You can learn again," she said confidently. There was a pause of silence before she continued: "Actually, you share a lot of facial features with her—except your nose. You have your dad's nose."

"I always thought that my father's nose was rather large," Sasuke said after a pause and Sakura gave a small smile.

"Sorry," she said apologetically, but Sasuke shook his head.

"When I can see again—if I can ever see properly again," Sasuke started slowly, "I'll look at this photograph and make sure that I have every detail burned into my memory, so that if I ever lose my sight again, I won't ever forget what they look like."

Sakura said nothing to this, but merely looked at him evenly. She just hugged his arm tighter, squeezing her eyes shut. She wanted him to be able to see them again; she swore didn't she? He would get to see the faces of his parents again, because she now knew what it was like... She knew how it was to struggle to recall the certain way her father smiled, or laughed. She wanted Sasuke to see his parents again; she wouldn't give up.

A/N: Due to the evil aura that the music was giving off, it was evident that their impending doom was looming over their heads.

Random line, that I wrote in the middle of the second last scene while I was listening to Final Fantasy VIII doom music. Very amusing

that.

Chapter 47

A/N: spin spin spin spin spin twirl laaaalaaaalallalaaalalalaaaa. You know why you're here...again. Lalalallaaa.

Lemon juice.

P.S.: New FAQ added to my profile for those of you who *still* don't know the answers. ;)

Chapter Forty-Seven: Festival Lights

It was the first week in November, and the first cool winds that whispered of winter finally swept over Konoha. It wasn't cold, per se, but it was definitely cooler, and the leaves had dropped off the trees. It would only get progressively colder over the next few months and it would only begin to get warmer again towards the end of February. As Sasuke trudged home on the evening of November second, his mind was preoccupied with thoughts of the Chuunin Exam—very few other things occupied his mind at this point in time, as the event crept nearer. Right now he had just realized that he had never taken into consideration the weather in terms of the Chuunin Exam, and that a leafless Forest of Death was no good in the way of hiding.

Not only was the change of the weather affecting how he thought about the exam, but also his garb had him concerned. Sakura had gone and packed away all his shorts and short-sleeved shirts; up on his protest, she merely gave him a disapproving look and lightly told him that it was ridiculous to wear such things in the winter months. Not that he minded wearing pants instead of shorts, and long sleeves, but he personally thought that the sleeves on his shirt seemed too narrow, and he felt his movements were constricted. Neither of these things had crossed his mind previously, probably because when he took the Exam last time, it had been in July.

Sasuke kicked off his shoes in the front entryway of the house when he arrived, having hardly noticed the journey there, only the coolness in the air, which was a dry coolness, so it didn't bother him much. He set his shoes neatly to the side out of habit, and closed the door behind him, extinguishing his senses and using his eyes instead. The hallway was dark, and the only light around was that coming from the kitchen at the end of the hall. Sasuke was mildly surprised by this, because that meant that Sakura had returned late from the hospital and she hadn't had time to turn on any lights yet.

Sakura had been offered a part-time shift at the hospital while he trained for the exam, as his training had effectively crippled the team from going on missions. Naruto could easily train for fun while he waited out the time period, but Sakura could only continue to keep her skills as a medic polished by healing. Not only that, but the Hokage thought it best if she worked at the hospital while they waited for the anti-depressants to take full effect, and only a partial load as not to stress her. She usually worked afternoons, when Sasuke was training with Anko or Kanaye, and then, later in the evening, Kakashi. But usually she wasn't home this late.

Sasuke walked down the hall towards the kitchen, his footsteps placed automatically in the dark—he had been in the house so long without sight, and even though he could see with chakra senses, he still knew the house better with his eyes closed. His sight had improved immensely over the past two weeks and he could almost see everything clearly, though he still lacked the colour in his vision—this frustrated Sakura endlessly as she could not figure out why his 'rod cells' were, as she put it, 'acting stupid'. Right now, regardless of lack of colour, he was able to see things almost as clearly as he needed; lacking detail in everything did not mean he couldn't see the rough idea of an object, and not fill in the blanks with touch. Sakura had thought that maybe corrective lenses might help, but he saw no change other than the world distorting a little.

He stepped into the kitchen, where Sakura was sitting at the table, a number of papers spread out before her. Sasuke was not the only

one who had been the victim of a changed wardrobe—Sakura had changed hers as well to fit the weather, though she could hardly be called a victim. She was wearing a long sleeved shirt with a Haruno clan circle on the back below the neck, and a simple pair of long pants. When he sat down opposite her at the table, he noticed she was playing with one of the buttons on the V-necked collar of her shirt; a look of concentration was on her face.

"You're home later than usual," she said calmly, not looking up; there was displeasure behind the composedness of the voice.

"It's only nine o'clock," he said in response, frowning; true he had been out later than usual, but it wasn't all that late.

She looked up at him then. "Is it really?" she turned her head to glance at the clock on the wall, the arms of which Sasuke could just barely make out from this distance, "It seems later than that. I guess I've been working too hard. But still, don't stay out late at night, makes me worry."

He didn't know why she would worry, Konoha was pretty safe in the way of crime, seeing as most of the village consisted of ninja who were sworn to protect the village. Though he supposed seeing as it was *him*, there might be some vengeful assassins who thought that he had too much freedom in the village or something. He'd been back for six and a half months without causing any trouble, so he thought it would be rather lacking of common sense to think he would try anything now. He voiced none of this to Sakura, however, seeing as maybe she was just afraid that someone else important in her life would suddenly disappear.

"What are you working on?" he asked her instead, getting up and taking a mug out of one of the cupboards.

"Oh, there's tea and some leftovers on the counter," Sakura said first, and then answered his question: "Well, I finished all my paperwork for my hospital shift today, so now I'm working on plans for Naruto's birthday party."

Sasuke took a mug of tea back to the table and sat down again, this time next to her looking down at the blurred sheet of paper on the table. Naruto's birthday had been almost a month ago, when they were in Kumogakure. He remembered Sakura saying that they should celebrate it, but when her father had gone missing, he didn't think they'd have one due to the circumstances. Apparently he was wrong; he took a sip of tea.

"So far I've got a basic guest list compiled, and some ideas of where to have it," Sakura continued without being asked to do so, "Oh, and clear your schedule for the tenth this month; tell everyone you've been training with that you have a previous engagement."

"Why?"

"Because that's the day of the party, of course—I'll need your help, so that's why you have to take the whole day off," Sakura said setting down her pen and stretching her arms out in front of her, "Don't tell Naruto though, I want it to be a surprise. I'm sure he's forgotten by now, or thinks we're not going to be having a party anymore."

Sasuke nodded slowly, "I'll be sure to let everyone know."

"You won't need to tell Neji or Kakashi—they'll be invited so they know why," Sakura replied then scribbled a note to herself on the corner of the sheet of paper before setting down the pen down again, "But it's going to be open to everyone—tell Anko and Kanaye that they can come too, if they'd like."

He nodded again as Sakura yawned. She closed her eyes and then leaned against him, sighing wearily. There was a pause from him before he rested his hand on her shoulder. There had been so much closeness between them physically the past few weeks that he hardly noticed when she leaned on him at home, or if she moved closer to him at night. She was tired now, and it was understandable—shifts at the hospital, get-togethers with Ino, visiting her mother, having to move past her grief, all of it was tiring. The first few months

after the initial shock of the slaughter of the clan had worn off, he had felt so tired, weary of the world.

Though now it had been around two and a half weeks since she had started on her medication, she had become organized again and she was more focused now. She was in control of things once again and she was doing well, all things considered. She'd become more cheerful again, and he had been overcome by the irritating foreign emotion again when he heard her singing one of his mother's tunes to herself again. She had started to go out on her own to visit her mother to see how she was doing, and Ino was having to whisk her away at fewer intervals. These changes were like pouring water on a wilted flower.

After a while she sat up again, and rubbed her eyes, "It's only nine, but I think I'm going to go to bed, I'm so tired."

Later that evening as the two of them lay in bed, Sasuke found himself wide awake though he doubted it had little to do with the fact that it was barely ten in the evening. Sakura on the other hand had sleepy sort of silence hanging about her, and he could tell by her chakra signature that she was on the verge of falling asleep, as it was slowly dwindling down to dormancy.

"You know," Sakura murmured suddenly, "It hardly seems fair that you seem to see my brother more often than I do."

"You've been busy," Sasuke replied, barely able to make out shapes in the darkness of the room. His night blindness had been getting better with the supplements of vitamin A, but it was still hard for him to see in the dark.

"I know, but I'm half considering sending him an official invite just as an excuse to see him again," she said with a slight tone of amusement.

There was silence again; Sasuke's thoughts dwelt on the past couple weeks. Sakura had been growing stronger in mind again, and

the whole episode had brought them closer to one another. Yet as it had been with training the first time with Neji, they hadn't spent too much time together, and as it was before, it was beginning to drive him crazy. Sakura's company was pleasant in a different way than anyone else's was, and it was tolerable, and preferable to loneliness. Even though Sakura had asked him if she could train with him, they hadn't done so yet. He had been hesitant to ask her when she wanted to, because of her current condition, but he wanted to spend time with her again, be able to see her other than seeing her at the house.

"Sakura...?" he started but then stopped, but what if it was too early? What if he should wait longer, and see if she felt better later? While her chakra signature still had a touch of melancholy to it, he sensed she was much happier, but...

"Yes?" she murmured sleepily, shifting a little so she was closer to him.

"Sing something," he said instead; she had a lot going on at this point in time, maybe he should just wait a little longer—he'd ask after Naruto's birthday party.

He lay in silence, listening as Sakura began to hum a quiet song. The melody was calm and peaceful, and it was in a minor key; he found himself relaxing, as he lay there with one arm around Sakura. Eventually the song faded away as she fell asleep in the middle of humming, her chakra signature glowing contentedly—the best it'd been in weeks.

For a long time after Sakura fell asleep, he lay awake, eyes barely seeing the faint splashes of moonlight on the ceiling. Eventually he joined Sakura in slumber, but not after many thoughts had chased themselves around in his head. In the end this thoughts had only revolved around the desire to spend more time with the woman sleeping beside him.

"You seem rather excited about all this," came the sound of Sasuke's voice to Sakura's right as they climbed the stairs in the Hokage Tower, his voice dry.

She cast a glance at the Uchiha, and she could help but smile as she reached the landing on the level where Tsunade's office was. Sasuke was carrying a large box of things that she had packed before he left the house, and even though he couldn't see over the top of it, he was probably using his chakra senses from other parts of his body to see around it.

"Well, yeah," Sakura said cheerfully, as they walked down the hall, past the office and to the next set of stairs up, "It'll be fun. I still can't believe that Tsunade-sama let me have the party on the roof. I'm glad she said yes, though, it'll be fun to decorate."

There was a grunt of a reply from Sasuke, and then they fell into silence as they climbed up the final set of stairs. As they were reaching the top, Sakura could hear the voices of all who had already decided to come and help set up; though she didn't know if they were all there yet, she knew that Ino, Hinata, and Ten Ten were definitely going to help, and Ten Ten said she was going to try and 'kidnap' Neji and Lee too. As the two of them reached the top of the stairs, Sakura reached out and opened the door for Sasuke, so that he could step through; she supposed she could have asked him who was there, as she knew that he would have been able to tell before they even entered the building.

"Forehead girl, you're late!" Ino shouted the moment she laid eyes on her pink-haired friend.

Sakura smiled apologetically and waved at her, surveying the scene. Though everyone was already there, nothing had been set up yet, though there were a lot of things there waiting to be prepared. Lee and Neji were standing by some folding tables—Lee with a stepladder hoisted over his shoulder, while Hinata was holding a stack of tablecloths. Ino and Ten Ten were standing by some boxes

that they had probably brought up, and Ino had a hand on her hip, while Ten Ten had her hands grasping a string of lanterns.

"Well, it's good to see that everyone's here," Sakura said to the group, "Let's get started then shall we?"

"Right!" Ten Ten said enthusiastically, "Sakura, look at these lanterns I brought from home! I thought we could hang them up between these...I dunno, prongs..."

"Great!" replied Sakura enthusiastically, "That's a great idea. It'll look so nice when we're finished!"

"Lee, bring the step ladder over here and help me get these up will you?" Ten Ten ordered, and Lee sprung to attention.

"Yes, Ten Ten!" he exclaimed loudly, "If we cannot get these lanterns up within the next hour, Ten Ten and I will run two hundred laps around Konoha!"

"Oi, Lee! It's not a race," Ten Ten reprimanded with protest, clearly afraid that they might end up doing two hundred laps.

"Sasuke, will you please help Neji set up the tables?" Sakura asked turning to him, and he nodded in response, putting down the box with the others that remained.

"What do you have in the bag, Sakura-san?" Hinata asked, pointing at a plastic bag Sakura was holding.

"Ooh, lemme see!" Ino said, bounding in.

"Nothing much, just tape and stuff," she replied with a shrug, "All the good stuff is in the box."

"Great stuff you've got here," Ino commented, looking inside the box, pulling out some brightly coloured streamers, "Where'd you get them? You can't tell me tell me that Sasuke had them at his place."

"No, he didn't," Sakura gave a laugh, "I asked my mom if we had some stuff, and she brought it over last night."

"Hey, you have some lanterns that look similar to Ten Ten's!" Ino said suddenly, discarding the streamers forcefully into Hinata's hands, "I dunno what we could do with more though. I think we have enough."

"I brought a large lantern," Hinata said quietly, looking shy, "Maybe we could hang them from the top of each prong and suspend the lantern in the middle."

"Hinata, you are an artistic genius," Ino stated, pulling the lanterns out of the box.

"Th-Thank you," Hinata stammered, a blush coming to her face.

"Aww, you're so cute," Ino said teasingly, pinching one of Hinata's cheeks. After Hinata had reddened further, the blonde kunoichi handed the string of lights to Sakura, "Here, Forehead Girl. You tie them together at the ends and I'll untangle the rest. We'll give them to Lee and Ten Ten to put up after."

Sakura took the strings of lights, but was turned towards Hinata when she said, "Will you get the lantern? I'm curious to see what it looks like."

She nodded and scuttled off, while Sakura and Ino prepared the string of lights. Ino was busy detangling them—muttering complaints to herself all the while—and Sakura was weaving the ends together to form a strong knot that would hold them together. It should support the lantern easily—that was assuming it was made of paper, which it probably was.

"So tell me, Sakura" Ino said as she pulled the entire mass of tangled lanterns out of the box, "How on earth did you manage to recruit Sasuke into doing something like this? I mean, he's not exactly the kind of type to help set up party decorations."

Sakura smiled to herself as she tightly fastened a knot, "Well, I didn't really ask him, I kind of demanded it of him. I told him I wanted his help, so he came. I guess if he really didn't want to be here, there wouldn't but much I could do about it, but he came anyways."

Just then Hinata came running back with her lantern, all folded up in her hands. Ino glanced at her, but then shifted her eyes just beyond the Hyuuga girl to rest on the younger Uchiha brother. Sakura looked up from what she was doing and followed her best friend's gaze, watching Sasuke help Neji set up the last table, with mild interest.

"Basically he came out of the goodness of his heart?" Ino said with an amused smile on her face.

"Something like that," Sakura replied, laughing.

"Is that really Sasuke? Or is it just someone who looks like him and is doing a dismal job of pretending to be him?" Ino asked with a wide grin, putting her hands on her hips.

"You do realize I can hear you," Sasuke called as the last table found its footing.

Ino looked startled, while Hinata visibly jumped, but Sakura just shot him a smile, though he wasn't facing her, and waved lazily. Paying no further attention to him, she reached out and took the lantern from Hinata. The way that it was folded up, it looked like a shallow paper dish, but despite this, Sakura could see that it was a brilliant orange. It would match Naruto perfectly.

"May I?" she asked Hinata, indicating that she wished to open it. After receiving a confirming nod from Hinata, she unfurled the lantern, making sure not to rip the paper—though it was fairly sturdy. When it was open entirely, it revealed an ornate traditional design around the top and bottom, and it inked its way around a yellow circle on either side of it. In the middle of the circle was painted the kanji for 'festival'. Ino's eyes lit up, and Sakura found herself smiling again.

"What do you think?" Hinata asked timidly, seeking approval.

"It's perfect," Sakura said with conviction as she looked at the Hyuuga girl. Neji and Sasuke had come up behind her and were now peering over her shoulders, "What do you think, Sasuke?"

"It's blurry," he replied plainly.

Sakura raised her eyebrows, she wasn't sure if he was providing his opinion of it, or was simply stating that he had no opinion because he couldn't see it properly. At least he could see the designs at all, she thought wryly, he wouldn't be able to see it at all if he wasn't regaining his vision, as his chakra senses wouldn't provide an accurate depiction for him.

"It is one of the lanterns that the Hyuuga House uses during New Years," Neji informed them, stepping around Hinata and into the circle of people gathered—sans Lee and Ten Ten, who were still at work—and squinting at it, "Hinata-sama, I am surprised you managed to get a hold of it. It is the one that hangs over the table of the Head Family during the New Year's Feast."

Hinata looked nervously at Neji when he said this, and started poking her index fingers together. "Well, I-I didn't really ask, Neji-niisan," she said nervously, "When I was little I would always look at it d-during dinner on New Year's and I thought it'd be nice to have it here for Naruto-kun's birthday party. P-Please don't tell my father, I don't know if he'll be pleased that I t-took it without permission."

Neji's eyebrows raised a little bit, but he nodded; he then turned to Sakura, "We are finished setting up the tables. What would you like us to do now?"

"Could you arrange the tables around the edge of the area?" she asked, and then said to Hinata, "And you brought table cloths, right? Could put those out too?"

Hinata nodded, and with the two of them, she departed to assist them, leaving Ino and Sakura again. Taking the lantern carefully, she laced the hook through her elaborate and sturdy knot. She held it up to Ino, who grinned.

"Perfect, let's get Ten Ten and Lee to hang it up for us," the blonde kunoichi declared.

The rest of the morning passed quickly, and while there were a few setbacks with a few things—the lanterns specifically—they managed to get close to finished before lunchtime. Ten Ten and Lee were done hanging lanterns after an hour and five minutes, but Ten Ten's fist to Lee's head was very persuasive in ensuring that nobody had to run two hundred laps around the village. By the time they were finished, Ten Ten and Ino were complaining about hunger, and Lee was enthusiastic to gallantly invite all the women out for lunch, receiving raised eyebrows from Neji and Sasuke.

There was some dispute over who would bring and/or buy foodstuffs, and they still required a sound system. After a much deliberation, mostly between the women—Neji and Sasuke just stood silently by—it was decided that the group would meet for lunch at Chouji's favourite food joint in half an hour. It was decided that Neji and Ten Ten would go shopping for food; Hinata had already volunteered to bake the cake, so that was out of the way at least. Lee said he knew someone who would be able to handle getting a sound system for them, and Ino said she would go see if Shikamaru and Chouji would want to join them. It was decided by the rest of the group that Sasuke and Sakura would go ahead and ensure that they could get a table for nine.

It was quite a surprise to Sakura when they arrived that they managed to get a table in less than five minutes, and when the waitress had sat Sasuke and Sakura down at the table, it would be a long wait for everyone else. Looking across the table at Sasuke, who was watching her with slightly unfocused eyes, she smiled.

"Thanks for all your help this morning," she said honestly; regardless of what Ino had said about it being surprising he did so voluntarily, she recognized the selflessness of his assistance and was grateful for it.

"Despite what Ino thinks, I came because you asked me to," Sasuke said plainly.

"I know," she said, suddenly unsure of how she felt about the ambiguity of his statement. Was he saying that he did it for her? Or would he have done the same for anyone if they had asked him? She was going to ask, but then thought better of it, deciding not to try interpreting it in any way.

"How are you feeling?" he asked her, a question that she had been hearing a lot over the past few weeks, "You seem much better today than before. But I doubt that you've forgotten about your father entirely."

She shook her head slowly then, "No, I can't forget about something like that so easily. If I could, it would have been very helpful in the past."

She didn't expect Sasuke to know what she was talking about, though she found herself reflecting on the dark two years when she had been suffering from depression before. She hadn't been able to forget Sasuke then, it was simply impossible for her to forget something that important to her. And if she had, then she would have been completed what Sasuke had tried to do, sever ties with her. She couldn't forget about him then, just like she couldn't forget about her father now, but being on anti-depressants had made it different somehow.

"It's...complicated to explain how I feel..." she said slowly, struggling for the words, "I'm happy now... I don't feel like the world is slowly smothering me in my own misfortunes anymore. I feel optimistic... but still I can't forget about Dad... I'm sad about it, definitely, but it's

like a lingering sadness in the back of my mind, it's not overwhelming and consuming all my thoughts now."

She trailed off, thinking about it, and then glanced at Sasuke. As per usual, his expression unreadable, but she couldn't help trying to guess what was flitting through his mind. When he had lost everyone close to him, he said that he couldn't help but be reminded of how alone he was, there was nobody around to distract him. She at least had the support of everyone around her, and him to care for her. And despite the outstanding fact that she had done so much to help him over the past few months, she felt indebted to him—he had done more for her than she had seen him do for anyone else. And as she looked at his eyes, unfocused, yet still looking at her, she felt frustration seize her.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked her, breaking her out of her reverie.

"That we're so close with your vision, yet so far away. Here, while we wait for the rest, let me try and heal something in the meantime."

"Will there be enough time?" he asked, frowning slightly.

"A little is better than nothing," she countered, extending her arms forwards, "Please?"

"You always say 'please', like I'm going to refuse to let you better my condition," he remarked with a wry smile, and he leaned forwards a little to allow her to place her fingers in the right places.

"Well, it's not like you haven't tried to say no before," she said, her chakra springing to her fingers, "After all you've gone through, I guess you still haven't learned that I don't take 'no' for an answer."

What he did next caught her completely by surprise. He smirked in response to her remark and then leaned far enough forwards so his forehead met hers. For the first time in a long while she saw the light

dancing faintly behind his eyes as he looked into hers, unfocused as his sight was.

"In which case, I suppose I'll have to fall in a few more flowerbeds before I learn then, won't I?"

Parties were never Sasuke's thing. Even as a child, he didn't like going to them, only remembering endless hours of boredom, waiting for the time when it was time to go home. His parents were usually talking to people about things he never cared about, and Itachi was always off somewhere being surrounded by an endless number of people who would fawn over him being the Uchiha prodigy. Sasuke always sat on a couch somewhere, or stood out of the way in a corner until it was time to leave.

So it served to reason that Sasuke found himself standing alone at the party that evening, leaning against the railing as music played and people were milling about on the landing. Clutching a glass of water in his hand, he sipped at it idly, trying to get a good focus on the people dancing around. There were a lot of people that had shown up, a number of which he was surprised had shown up at all.

He smirked, remembering the start of the party, as he watched Naruto come up behind the Hyuuga girl and pull her into a sudden embrace. What Sakura had arranged was that all the lights had to be darkened while Naruto was summoned to the Hokage's Tower to see the Hokage, only to be told that she was outside on the roof. The instant that the loud-mouthed idiot had stepped out the door, the lights were flicked on, and a large shout of surprise had gone up. The dōbō had fallen backwards and almost fell down the stairs in alarm. There had been the presentation of the cake after all the greetings, and a large round of singing, which Sasuke didn't participate in, noticing that Hyuuga Neji didn't attempt to exercise his voice either. They then got Naruto to blow out all seventeen candles—but he only managed to blow out twelve, meriting a comment from Kiba saying something about a harem of girlfriends.

Not many people had brought gifts, but had shown up in good spirit and were contributing to the merriment as part of what they were to give him. However there were a few gifts that made their sighting. Kakashi, for instance, had bought him a copy of the first volume of Icha Icha Paradise. The Toad Sage, Jiraiya, had then signed it with flourish, and produced a large bottle of sake. The Hokage was prompt in confiscating the bottle from the youth, making a comment about underage adolescents, but poured herself some when she thought her secretary wasn't looking.

The Hyuuga girl had come quietly forwards with a wrapped parcel, which turned out to be a long scarf she had apparently hand knit for him. Though he could barely notice the change of the girl's colouration, he was sure that she was bright red, despite having officially become Nauto's girlfriend a month or so ago. After what gifts were brought had been brought forwards, Maito Gai's pet student had made a wild leap towards the sound system and turned on the music. People had flocked to the center to dance, making it easier for Sasuke to identify who else had come to the party.

Some were people that Sasuke had hardly seen before, like Kiba's sister, whose name escaped him. (He noted with irritation that that seemed to happen at an unsettling frequency.) He also sensed Anko in the crowd, standing next to Kakashi. Kanaye was standing farther away from him, and out of sight, while right in front of him, Yuuhi Kurenai and Sarutobi Asuma were dancing together.

"I can't say I'm surprised to find you here, by yourself," came the voice of the approaching Hyuuga Neji, holding a small paper plate with a small quantity of fruit on it.

Sasuke turned and looked at him, the blurred form getting slightly worse, and then slightly better as he gazed on, "And I can't say I'm surprised that you are the one who comes and joins me."

"I never was one for festivities," Neji remarked calmly, coming over and leaning on the railing next to him, "Though I'm guessing you can say the same for yourself."

Sasuke nodded slowly, "You're right, I never was."

"You should have some of the cake. Hinata-sama is an excellent cook," Neji said calmly, gesturing to the table off to their right.

"I don't like sweet things," Sasuke replied automatically, not even glancing at the table.

"Ah, yes, I had forgotten," Neji stated, "Where is Sakura-san?"

Sasuke made a vague nodding gesture out to the sea of people in front of them, where Sakura could barely be seen moving through the crowd, dancing with Kiba, who was the fourth person she had danced with that evening. The first had been Maito Gai's pet student, who had bounded away from the sound system the instant it had activated and asked her hand in a dance. Sasuke noticed with an inward disgruntled twitch that the song had been one about two people who did not recognize each other's feelings at first but came together in the end. Not that he was bothered by the lyrics, he reminded himself, the song was merely not to his liking. Next in line had been Kakashi, who had just finished dancing with Mitarashi Anko, who Sasuke noticed had been acting very flirtatious around him. After Kakashi had come Kanaye—an entertaining dance to watch, to say the least, as he would randomly pull her into a headlock and dig his fist playfully into her skull.

"Does she know Kiba well?" he asked Neji casually, his eyes watching them as they twirled past, Sakura laughing at something the boy had said.

"I don't know if they are all that close, but I do believe that his sister is on the same team as Sakura's brother," Neji said speculatively, "And I believed that *they* are quite close. How many dances has Sakura been through?"

"I think four," Sasuke said, deliberately trying to sound as if he was unsure. He kicked himself mentally, telling himself that he shouldn't know this, "But I'm not sure, I haven't kept count."

"Of course," Neji replied in a very neutral tone; Sasuke closed his eyes for a second, just to activate his senses to examine Neji clearly without having to actually look at him. There was a hint of a smirk pulling at the corner of the Hyuuga's lips, causing Sasuke to feel irritated.

"Sakura does seem quite popular though," Neji remarked nonchalantly, which further irritated Sasuke for no identifiable reason, "She is quite the character, very outgoing, and bright. That is what attracts most people to her when they first meet her, just as Naruto's unrelenting loyalty and determination draw people to him. Naruto and Sakura are similar that way, once one has befriended either of them, they are certain to have a friend for life."

Sasuke opened his eyes then, and cast an actual glance at Neji. The man was a very perceptive person, he realized, and very observant of other people. Perhaps that was why Neji could tell him that Kiba's sister and Kanaye were on the same team and he wouldn't be all that surprised that Neji of all people held that knowledge. He wondered bemusedly what other repositories of knowledge the Hyuuga prodigy possessed, and how much of it Ino would kill to get her hands on. He was going to make a remark about this, when out of the corner of his eye he caught movement.

His peripheral vision was still pretty lousy, and while he saw movement, it wasn't until his jerked his head to look at it, startled, that he realized what, or rather, who it was. It was the girl from Team Gai, Ten Ten, who was coming towards them. Though he had only witnessed it firsthand once previously, Sasuke had heard that she was a renowned weapons master. Looking at the petite girl who looked only slightly more intimidating than Hyuuga Hinata, he was having a difficult time putting the label 'weapons master' to her.

"Neji, don't stand here by yourself like an emo person," she reprimanded coming over and putting her hands on her hips, "Sheesh, you shouldn't be so anti-social!"

"I'm not alone," Neji pointed out, indicating towards Sasuke, "Uchiha is keeping me company on this fine evening."

"That hardly counts. Two people who are by themselves, being anti-social don't qualify as keeping each other company," Ten Ten retorted, reaching over and grabbing Neji by the arm, "Come dance with me, now."

Giving in, Neji straightened up, seeming unwilling to put up a fight.

"By the way, Sasuke-san, your forehead still looks a little bit red," Ten Ten commented over her shoulder before disappearing with Neji almost amalgamated to her arm.

Sasuke scowled slightly at this comment, rubbing the spot on his forehead disdainfully, probably making it even redder in the process. His vision slid through varying degrees of blurry as he watched them walk away. His eyes acting a little funny at the moment, having experienced a mishap during lunchtime when Sakura towards the end of their short healing session.

He could feel Sakura's warm chakra flowing through his eyes, the nurturing energy healing and strengthening them. He could feel her concentration, it was both evident in her chakra signature sitting across from him, and the chakra molding its way through his chakra system. He knew she was trying to get as much done in such a little time; the seconds seemed to be flying by, but not as quickly as her.

"Wow, that's something you don't see everyday," came a voice sharply from nowhere, "Everyone, take note of this moment in their lives, Sasuke plus physical contact."

Sakura jumped, her hands sharply pulling away from his head, their foreheads, which were touching, banging sharply into each other. The chakra flow to his eyes cut off so sharply it felt like someone had hooked his optic nerve and yanked really hard. Water began to accumulate in the corners of his eyes, a strange burning and tickling sensation attacking his eyes.

" Shit!" Sakura swore loudly as Sasuke began to furiously rub his eyes, "Oh gods, Sasuke, are you alright?"

Sasuke tried to speak an answer to her, but all that came out was an incoherent mumble. She put her hand on his shoulder, and he could sense her concern in her voice when she spoke to him.

" Look at me," she ordered quickly. He tried to, looking up at her through blurred vision mixed with water, "Are you in pain?"

" It feels like there are pins and needles in my eyes," he said grouchily, and then, pinpointing Ino's chakra signature, glared as violently as he could at her, for it was her who had spoken.

" What'd I do?" she complained, clearly confused.

" You broke Sakura's concentration and caused her to yank her chakra out of my eyes faster than you can blink," he snapped angrily at her, "Do you have any idea how that feels?"

He was acutely aware of everyone behind her staring at the two of them, but he didn't care really. He was too pissed off and too much in pain to care how the others were reacting. He scowled and wiped more moisture from his eyes, and then noticed that his hand was steadily getting blurrier, and then fading back to what he had been used to. He looked up at Sakura, trying not to show his alarm.

" What?" she asked uncertainly.

" My vision is getting worse," he said, as calmly as he could, "And then getting better again. Do you think that it'll get progressively worse?"

She bit her lip, "I'm not sure. Here, let me examine it again. I promise not to jerk this time."

" Tch," he replied, but leaned his head forwards again.

" Well then, the rest of us will just sit down then, shall we?" Ino quipped, sliding into the booth on Sasuke's left.

Sakura had said that there didn't appear to be any damage done by her harsh treatment, but some of the cells were going 'crazy'. She said she didn't have a better word to describe the process happening; it seemed that some of the remaining inactive cells in his eye were sporadically working and then not working anymore, while some of the working ones were shutting down for about fifteen second intervals. She had predicted it would stop after a while. Unfortunately for him, he was still waiting for it to stop.

It was then that Naruto made his way out of the crowds of people by the tables of food and came over to where Sasuke was, wearing the thick scarf the Hyuuga girl had made him.

"Oi, teme, you shouldn't stand here by yourself at my birthday party," he said in greeting, his grin broad, "You're going to come across as predictable if you always sit out at social gatherings."

Sasuke raised an eyebrow at him, "Won't it make me predictable too if I always participate in such events, dobe?"

Naruto paused for a minute, a dumbfounded expression on his face. "That hurt my brain, teme," he complained, leaning against the railing where Neji had been standing until recently.

"That just proves how much of an idiot you are, that's all," Sasuke remarked smoothly, earning himself a sharp elbow in the ribs.

"I haven't seen you in a while," Naruto remarked then, changing the topic immediately, "I've heard you've been training up for the Exam. What is it with you not asking me to help you, huh?"

Sasuke paused for a moment, looking up at the hanging lanterns over their heads, watching them sway in the wind, "Things have been complicated..."

There was a pause from Naruto, who turned and looked over at the guests, "With Sakura-chan, ne?"

Sasuke changed the trajectory of his view and focused on Sakura, who had just indulged Maito Gai's pet student in another dance. He pushed down the twinge of irritation, which he couldn't figure out why he was feeling, "Yeah."

"That couldn't have been easy for you," Naruto commented offhandedly.

Sasuke turned and glared at him, " *Now* you're making me feel predictable."

"I did have trouble at first," Sasuke said after a minute, reluctantly, "I still sometimes do."

"Sakura-chan's really strong," Naruto said, watching her too, a lazy grin on his face, "She's dealt with so many things over these past years, I think she'll be okay. But don't let her think about her dad too much. He was a great guy, once he stopped being anal around me, and I'll miss him."

Sasuke raised his eyebrows at this, but decided not to comment. It was understandable that Sakura's father wouldn't hate everyone he ran into, though that may have been the first impression it usually gave off.

"But I think both you and me know what happens if we think too much about the things we shouldn't think of," he finished quietly.

Sasuke was quiet for a moment. He could understand perfectly, he thought with realization. Why hadn't he recognized it before? Sakura's sorrow had gone with his perception of Sakura. She was foreign to him, someone he didn't understand, but someone who was trying to understand him. Why had he thought of her as something set apart from him? It was easy to compare it to his own hardships, and suddenly everything became clearer. He looked on at

her as the dance stopped and she laughed at something Maito Gai's pet student had said to her when they stopped dancing.

"But even though she's strong," Naruto added afterwards, looking at Sasuke with an uncharacteristically perceptive look, "That doesn't mean she can't break."

Sasuke broke his gaze from Sakura long enough to look at Naruto. The way that Naruto was looking at him, he knew for a fact that something of his revelation had shown on his face. He hated it when he let his emotions show so carelessly.

He tried to cover up for his lapse in control by saying: "What are you getting at, dobe?"

"You're still an important person to her," Naruto said with a shrug, "All I'm saying is be there for her."

It was getting late in the evening, and Sakura was finding that she was getting tired. She had spent too much time socializing with everyone during the party, and now her energy had run out. She had danced with Lee three times, Kanaye once, Kakashi once, Kiba once, and Naruto once. She had been pulled aside by a number of people who hadn't seen her in a while that wanted to know how she was doing. And as time flew by, the music had gone from loud and lively to quiet and calming. There was only one person whom she hadn't had any time to spend with, who was also the most important person to her here.

She was looking for him now, her quiet, reserved Uchiha. She spotted him leaning against the railing towards the front of the building. He was so predictable, she thought with a smile. With the coloured lanterns hanging above him, and the view of Main Street behind him, the lights of the houses in the background, he looked very picturesque. His eyes were closed, and she wondered if he was examining the world clearly through his senses or if she was just fatigued.

He opened his eyes as she drew near to him, and she gave him a happy smile. "Hey. I thought I might find you here."

"You're not the only one who's thought that," he said wryly, and she gave a light laugh.

"Well, I figure I owe you some company, seeing as I've been practically neglecting you all evening."

" 'Practically'?" he remarked with a sarcastic smirk, "Try 'entirely'."

"I guess I can't gloss it over," she said guiltily, "Forgive me?"

"I never said I was upset with you," he replied. Even though she knew he was probably just saying that to keep his pride, and that he probably was a little hurt by it, she still felt a twinge of pain at his answer.

"Well, I've decided to pay you some company," she retorted with mock haughtiness, "And there will be nothing you can do to get rid of me."

"Nothing?" he asked, still smirking lightly.

"Nothing," she confirmed, reaching out and grabbed his arm, "Now, come. Dance with me for the next song."

"I don't dance," he said then, his voice becoming unenthusiastic.

"Oh, come on," she said pulling him up off the railing, "I don't care if you don't dance. I told you that you're not getting rid of me."

"It's not that I *don't* dance," he stated it flatly, and then muttered grudgingly under his breath, "I don't know *how* ."

She paused, looking at his face; he was refusing to meet her gaze. The back of his neck was growing slightly red and she put her free hand over her mouth to hide her grin. Once her composure had been regained, she lowered her hand.

"Sasuke, if you can memorize and execute the complicated footwork of shinobi combat," she started with a tone of finality in her voice, "then you can learn to dance."

It was unknown to Sasuke how exactly Sakura had managed to drag him from his comfortable perch at the railing and on to the dance floor, but somehow she had managed it. He felt so out of place, and he wasn't the only one who thought so, because he didn't need his senses to know that the people around him were staring. Sakura was telling him about how he should follow the time of the music with his footwork, saying something about it being a slow song, so he didn't have to worry about anything complex. He was hardly listening.

His thoughts were floating around the foreign environment; foreign situations he was used to, having been in his home setting and it established an anchor point on which he could hold himself. But now he was in a foreign situation and in a foreign place—a dance floor, dancing. He was holding Sakura like she had instructed him, his right hand on her shoulder blade, his left holding hers. He was certain that he was holding her a lot farther out than he was supposed to, but she had laughed and said if he held her any closer, he might as well have them attached surgically. They were turning slowly on the dance floor, moving in unhurried circles, his feet picking up naturally to the rhythm of the music.

His eyes floated around the surrounding area, view in the different people around them, observing how they moved. Kanaye and Kiba's sister were dancing not that far off, enough distance between them to allow for light conversation, while Nara Shikamaru and Ino were dancing closer to him and Sakura, Shikamaru seeming to hold Ino as far away from him as humanly possible. She had latched herself onto his arm and hadn't let go of him all evening. Meanwhile, Hyuuga Neji seemed to be putting up with another dance from Ten Ten. They were dancing pretty closely, Sasuke noted, while Sarutobi Asuma was holding Yuuhi Kurenai in his arms, her head leaning

against his shoulder. All the while, he observed this his eyes kept flitting back to Sakura who was busy watching his feet, praising him.

"I think you've got the hang of it," she said to him, looking up, just as he looked back to her again, "It's not that hard, is it?"

He shook his head slowly at her; he hadn't heard a word of her instruction, yet he felt confident enough not to look like an idiot. They swayed across the dance floor for a while, and Sasuke began to tune out the others around them, focusing on Sakura's grasp on him, and his on hers. He felt like she was a delicate object in his arms, despite what Naruto had said to him, Sakura was strong, but he couldn't help but imagine her as the pink rose he had labeled her as so long ago. She could break; nobody should be allowed to break, her least of all.

Instinctively he pulled her close to him, holding her against his chest. She let out a quiet exhalation of surprise, but she didn't pull away when he held her there. It was a familiar position to him, except this time it was devoid of tears, and there was nothing to him except the music, the dance, and Sakura. He looked above them at the lanterns, the large Hyuuga festive lamp hanging above them, swaying in the wind. And then quite suddenly, everything became clear.

Everything had just slid into focus. The lights were no longer blurry and the stars were no longer distant faded specks in the black sky. The ropes suspending the lanterns became obvious and he could see the strands of thread in each coil. He stopped moving, holding Sakura still against his body as they stood directly below the lantern.

"Sakura..."

She pulled away and looked up at him, but he didn't look back down, his sight fixed on the clear image of the sky above him, "What is it?"

"I can see," he said quietly, his voice lost in his own wonder, "I can see them, the festival lights."

A/N: Song to listen to during the dance scene. The song Epitaph from .Hack/Liminality. I know that that may sound creepy, the song being called *epitaph* and all, but it's soooo pretty! And it's the perfect mood. Oh, and FYI, Sasuke is still colour blind, things just aren't blurry anymore.

Chapter 48

A/N: Well, I decided to update one day early, because I'm feeling nice. But I'm *not* going to update again until August 6th, because I hate you all!! JUST KIDDING. About the hating you guys thing, that is. I'm actually going away to Japan for three weeks and won't be able to update until August. Sorry everybody. I hate it when I do this to you guys, because I know it makes you guys sad (most of you that is). Be sure to keep an eye out in August. (I love you guys, I really do!)

Having become acquainted with many lovely Japanese people over the course of the year, the questions asked about kimono, back in chapter four, have been cleared up. Kimono are for both men and women, just like pants, just different styles for each gender. Yukata are lighter kimono-like garments, worn in the warmer months of the year. Hakama are used for special ceremonies—usually graduation ceremonies.

Chapter Forty-Eight: The One Word

As the last few weeks of training took place, things had developed into a normal routine, which Sasuke followed everyday almost exactly. Every morning he would wake up before Sakura did and leave the house, meeting with Neji for some early morning training. Afterwards, he would return home, to find Sakura either making breakfast, or gone; after having something to eat, he would go and meet Naruto for some training, and then afterwards Kakashi. He had told Kakashi to meet him at a time half an hour before he was finished training with Naruto, so waiting for Kakashi was never too long a wait. Once Kakashi was finished with him, he would train on his own, working on techniques that he wanted to emphasize during the final rounds of the Chuunin Exam.

During the time he was on his own, he practiced and trained blindfolded. His sight was perfect in clarity, and bits of colour had started to come back too, though there had been no changes as significant as the one on Naruto's birthday. He could make a guess at what colours things were, though now he was beginning to suffer from red-green colour blindness, and purple-blue colour blindness. If he was shown a green tomato and a red one, he would not be able to accurately tell which was which. Sakura of course had been faithfully documenting all of this, and had been sending in period reports to the Hokage. Of course, Sakura being Sakura, couldn't leave his inability to differentiate between colours without complaints and frustration on her end. Though Sakura said his sight might not be one hundred percent for the exam, he was sincerely hoping she could manage to pull it off in time.

If his sight was near perfect, Sakura had asked him one day, why was he fighting with a blindfold? It seemed to defeat the purpose of restoring his sight, she had said. He had replied that he did not want his ability to use his chakra senses to lessen with time, because with sight or not, it was very useful. And though he had not voiced it to her, he was hoping that a shinobi who could fight blindfolded would go over well with the judges. He had not yet been able to combine both his sight and his senses at the same time—the information of given by both being of different nature caused confusion in his mind. If given enough time, he would probably be able to develop a method, but he didn't think he would have anything in time for the exam.

It was the first week in December, and Sasuke was training alone as he had done everyday for the past month. And as he knew eleven thirty drew near, he knew it was soon time for the next person to come and assist him in training. And that person, he noted with an inward grin, was Sakura. As her medication had taken full effect, he finally felt certain that he could ask her to train with him, without any adverse reactions from her friends and family. Then came the problem of having to work around her shifts at the hospital, before

they finally settled on training during her hour and a half lunch break. And the focus of their training was, upon Sasuke's request, genjutsu.

While in the past, he had practiced removing himself from powerful genjutsu, placed on him by Sakura, he had managed to cut down getting out of her strongest genjutsu from two hours to a mere ten minutes. Anything weaker than her top three genjutsu, he was able to get out of almost instantaneously—sometimes he had managed to break it before he had even started to tip over into unconsciousness. Other times, when he was not as fortunate, he would break out just before he hit the ground, and then he would be forced to become painfully acquainted with the earth. But because the time was so short between being afflicted with genjutsu and dispelling it, it was unnecessary to continue practicing now. What he and Sakura were now focusing on was his ability to use genjutsu.

The familiar chakra signature began to come within range of his awareness, and a mischievous smirk came on his lips. He formed a few hand signs and then released his chakra, causing a genjutsu to blanket the area. He'd see if Sakura would notice; she had told him that it was one of the more deceptive ones she had taught him—causing only a subtle difference between illusion and what actually was. The subtle difference this time was his presence in the area, making it look like he wasn't there. He had never missed training, so he figured she would be able to figure it out sooner rather than later.

A few minutes later, Sakura appeared carrying a plastic shopping bag that no doubt held food from the hospital cafeteria. She always brought lunch for the both of them, because the food was remarkably good. He watched her as she looked around for him, and then a puzzled expression appeared on her face. Amused, he walked over to a tree and sat beneath it, observing her, waiting to see when she would figure it out.

"Sasuke," she called, looking around, but he didn't answer her.

She pulled a cell phone out of her pocket—the hospital gave her one everyday at lunch time in case she was needed—and checked the

time on the screen, putting it back after donning a further puzzled expression. She looked around the area again, and then looked directly at him. He smirked—had she figured it out? She came towards him, and then he noticed that she still looked troubled, and it was then that he realized that she was probably coming to sit under the tree to wait for him.

He opened his mouth to say something, but it was too late, she tripped on one of his outstretched legs, let out a cry of surprise, and came tumbling down. He reached out and caught her by the shoulders so that she wouldn't fall on top of him, and then there was an awkward pause. Awkward on Sasuke's end, bewildered on Sakura's.

"Kai," she muttered, her eyes wide with shock, only to widen further as she became able to see him.

"Hi," he offered, his nose probably no more than a centimeter from touching hers. He was just realizing how close they actually were.

"You're evil, you know that?" she said, not moving, "And you have no idea how funny it looks with your blindfold over your forehead protector."

He disregarded the latter comment, "You were the one who tried to sit on me."

"But you were the one who put the genjutsu on this place," she argued, giving him a teasingly stern look.

"You were the one who taught it to me," he replied lightly, "I thought you'd be able to see through it."

"I wasn't expecting it," she said, her face long rid of the confusion by this point, now she looked irritated. He couldn't help but smile a little, "What?"

"You look comical," he replied, giving her a smirk.

"Maybe because you're not even two inches from my face," she retorted, finally pushing herself back a little from him, "But honestly, that was unfair. I'm only letting you off this time because you almost smiled, even if it was at my expense. But don't do that to me, you had me worried for a second."

"I've never been gone before," he pointed out, "Why should you be worried now?"

"I was going to gamble that you weren't that far off *because* you've never missed training before," she replied and Sasuke wasn't sure if she had just avoided the question or if it had merely come out that way.

"Anyways, lunch?" she offered, "We're just wasting time arguing now."

They detangled themselves from one another and Sakura broke out the food, which today was sandwiches; tomato and cheese for Sasuke, and egg salad for Sakura.

"What are we going to work on today?" Sasuke asked, opening the annoying plastic packaging.

Sakura held her sandwich in front of her face thoughtfully. "Well, what've you got down so far? Basic genjutsu you already knew, and we expanded on that, right? I taught you some of my more complex genjutsu, which took you forever to learn."

"It's harder without the Sharingan," Sasuke said, defensively.

"I know, but still, I didn't think it'd be that difficult for you," Sakura remarked though a mouthful of sandwich, "You're supposed to be a prodigy. But it doesn't matter. Without your struggles, we never would have discovered what happens when the results end up half-assed."

Sasuke frowned, he wouldn't have called the results 'half-assed', though he would admit that the results of partially correct genjutsu was peculiar. Sometimes the genjutsu would only half work, and instead of a full genjutsu falling on Sakura, only parts would affect her. For instance, once he had tried to put a genjutsu on her that resembled a smelly swamp—retaliation for putting him through all the quagmire-ish genjutsu months ago—but she had only managed to smell it. She had clapped her hands over her nose and yelled 'kai' a number of times, glaring at him all the while. Another time he had tried to subject her to the illusion of a thunderstorm, but she had only tasted the dampness in the air. Another attempt at the thunderstorm had only resulted in her hearing the storm but nothing else. Similar effects had happened with sight and touch.

It had taken a number of days, and endless hours of frustration on his part before he had managed to get the genjutsu right, and even now, he still occasionally managed to mess up. Without the Sharingan, learning new techniques was very difficult. He found himself wondering how many hours, days, weeks, Naruto would have spent learning new abilities, having gained a new insight into learning without a gift. He had wondered before how the idiot of the class could pull off such difficult techniques, and he realized how much effort he must have put into it.

But despite the frustration, failures, and setbacks, Sakura was right that they had made some progress. He didn't know how or when, but partial genjutsu could be useful. And judging by the number of times that Sakura needed to shout 'kai', he figured the strength of them was pretty powerful. He took another bite of his tomato and cheese sandwich.

"So, basically, I think we can work mostly on fixing seams in genjutsu," Sakura was now saying licking her fingers clean, "One of the major weaknesses in illusionary techniques is flaws. A flaw in an illusion, a part of it that doesn't make sense, is the basis point for which all genjutsu can come undone. As soon as a flaw is realized, it is easy to pick the fabric of the illusion apart, thread-by-thread until

there is a huge hole in which you can escape. Of course, the more powerful the genjutsu, the more stubbornly the threads are stuck together—it takes a while to get out of."

She looked at him then. "You're still not finished?" she laughed.

Sasuke looked at the last bit of sandwich, the pale colours of the bread, red tomato and orange cheese showing palely. He stuffed the rest of it in his mouth, chewing quickly, and swallowing.

"It's not fair—I swear, only you can stuff food in your mouth like that and look good doing it," she complained with a teasing air in her voice, standing up.

Just then, Sakura's phone vibrated, emitting a loud buzz. Sakura had the phone in her pocket and she let out a startled squawk, almost falling over again. Sasuke snorted as she pulled the phone out, smirking amusedly at her.

"I'd berate you, except for the fact that that was almost a smile," she said, casting him a disgruntled look as she put the phone to her ear, "Moshi moshi?"

He listened carefully, and if the cold winter breeze had been still, and the bare branches of the trees had been silent, he would have been able to hear what was being said on both ends of the conversation. Even though he did not rely on his other senses as much as he used to, they were still sharp.

"Now?" Sakura was saying, after the person on the other end was done speaking, "But I'm training right now, and I have a shift later today... Oh, really? Who? ...Okay. That's fine then, I guess. Where do I have to go? ...Right... No, I know where it is. I'll be there soon. Oh, wait—! Question—two actually. What colour are they, and has the date been set yet? ...Okay, the twelfth. Okay, well I'm sure we'll find out the colour when we get there. I'll see you in a bit... Okay. Bye."

She hung up and gave him an apologetic look. He cocked and eyebrow at her. He didn't really know what she had been talking about, but he knew she would most likely explain.

"That was one of the med students who's a year ahead of me," Sakura said, "Apparently, Tsunade-sama's called all graduating students to a formal wear boutique to get fitting in hakama to wear for the ceremony. The ceremony is on the twelfth, by the way."

"I see," he said, rising to his feet, "I suppose this means no training."

"Yeah, basically," she replied, "They even managed to get someone to cover my shift at the hospital, so I guess it's pretty important if they're going to go to those lengths."

"Alright," he replied, standing, shoving the empty plastic container back into the bag, "I understand."

"I suppose you don't want to come?" she said taking the bag from him.

"Only if you want me to."

"I can't imagine you'd find it all that interesting," she said with an apologetic smile.

"Well, I am perfectly capable of entertaining myself," he replied with a shrug, putting his hands in his pockets, "Go, you'll be late."

"Okay. Sorry, for not being able to train today," she said giving him a quick hug, "Twice as long this weekend, I promise."

"I'll hold you to it," he said smirking.

"Good. I'll see you later then."

She took to the trees, leaping off quickly, the chakra being put in her feet pushing her off. He watched her until she was out of sight, and then continued to monitor her signature until that too was out of

range. He let out an uncharacteristic sigh; now to find something to do. He pulled the blindfold back over his eyes. Might as well.

It was mid-afternoon, and at that very moment, the Hokage could be found straightening up her desk. She was just sorting the last few papers she had been through just before she was going to leave and meet the graduating students down at the boutique to oversee the fittings. Though she really didn't need to be there, she had managed to convince Shizune that she was needed there to make sure that the right shades of colour were used to match the décor that would be at the ceremony. Shizune had reluctantly accepted this, and while Tsunade had a feeling she wouldn't find trying on graduation hakama all that interesting, it was better than receiving more paperwork.

There was a light knock on the office door and Tsunade looked up from where she was standing. A look of confusion crossed her face—she wasn't expecting any visitors before she was leaving.

"Come in," she called, straightening up.

The door opened slowly, and immediately her guard went up when she saw the man in the door. The man walked in slowly, his pace labored as he did so, a cane in hand, and a limp in his step. Bandages covered his one eye, and a fine x-shaped scar decorated his hard chin. Behind him, Tsunade could see that the two councilors, Koharu and Homura, were also with him, and inwardly she felt a great frustration build up. Whatever those three wanted, it would take a long time, and it would be very taxing on her.

"Danzo," she said coolly, "Councilors. I would like to say it is a pleasure to see you, but in all honesty it isn't. You see, I have somewhere to be and your arrival is a little ill-timed."

"Whatever you have planned can wait," Danzo said tersely, and Tsunade bristled mentally. She always hated the way he talked to her, like he was in control of her or something.

"Well, not for long—this had better be quick," though she knew that it definitely wouldn't be.

Homura stepped forwards, "We have come to discuss with you the Chuunin Exam. It has come to our attention that you intend on letting Uchiha Sasuke participate in the exam coming at the end of this month."

Tsunade narrowed her eyes at them, "Yes, that is true. What about it?"

"He is a criminal against this village, Tsunade!" Koharu barked, sounding incredulous, "And you intend on letting him participate in the exam?!"

"Why shouldn't he be allowed to participate? You've allowed him out of the village, for gods' sakes! What difference does it make if he takes the exam or not?" Tsunade snapped, trying to keep from shouting. If this continued one the way it was already going, it wasn't going to be long before she would start.

"He is doing the missions as the part of his punishment for his betrayal!" Koharu snapped back, "He is nowhere near to completing his number of required hours. And until such time, he should not be allowed to participate in any of Konoha's Exams or specialty groups. And even then, maybe he should not be allowed."

"We were very lenient with him," Homura said, his voice scrutinizing, "But this is perhaps too much. Taking the exam is a privilege to those who are loyal to their villages. In no case has it ever been a right. The Uchiha has betrayed this village, and who's to say he won't do it again?"

"What's the harm in letting him take the bloody exam?" Tsunade shouted. Yep, she knew it, she was yelling already, "It's in Konoha—Otogakure is not permitted to participate, for obvious reasons. What could happen?"

"Need we remind you," it was Danzo who spoke, "that he was a key component in a second plot to invade Konoha during the Chuunin Exam? How do we know that he has actually truly returned to our side? Perhaps he wishes to partake in the Exam so that he can assist Orochimaru by creating a foothold in Konoha?"

"I can't believe you're suggesting that! Have you *any* idea what the boy has been through? That is just ridiculous!" Tsunade hollered, banging her fists down on the table, "And need *I* remind *you* , Danzo, that you wouldn't have found out about said plot had it not been for Sasuke?"

"It could have been a ploy to gain our trust to let him partake in the Exam," Danzo countered, his voice still calm, but dark and cold. Tsunade hated that—how she would lose her temper and he could still continue like she wasn't shouting, like he wasn't being unreasonable, like they weren't talking about something important.

"Sasuke has done nothing but good since his return," Tsunade said through clenched teeth, "He has been very willing in giving information, he had assisted us in missions. I believe that he sincerely wants a second chance here in Konoha. He has nowhere else to go, and his friends still care about him like he had never left. We were the ones who saved him and treated him when we found him blinded and near death. We made him our responsibility the instant we saved him."

"And perhaps in retrospect we should have left him, or killed him when he was found," Danzo replied, his voice as calm as if he were asking Tsunade how her paperwork was coming.

As for Tsunade, that was the last straw. "Get. Out. Of. My. Office," she snarled, her hands balling up into fists as she took a menacing stride forward, "Do not say anything of the sort about anyone again."

"Tsunade, calm yourself," Koharu ordered.

Taking a deep calming breath, Tsunade merely stopped moving; she did not relax her fists or lower her guard. "Uchiha Sasuke *will* be participating in the Chuunin Exam, and if anything happens, *I* will be the one to take full responsibility," she said fiercely, glaring daggers at Danzo.

"Very well. I see that there is no way we can sway you," said Homura after a long stretched out silence, "But we will be watching him."

"Fine," Danzo snapped, a dark fury marring his brow only slightly, "But we will do more than watch him. I understand his other two teammates are Chuunin already, so he requires a team. I will put a member of ANBU on his team to watch him."

"You can't let a member of ANBU take the Chuunin Exam," Tsunade argued, "They're way above that level, it wouldn't be fair to the others participating."

"Actually, that is a very good idea, Danzo," pondered Koharu, "The member of ANBU would simply withdraw from the exam before the finals."

"I agree," said Homura, "Danzo, it will be left to you to find someone suitable for the task."

Tsunade couldn't believe what she was hearing. She was standing there, listening to them making decisions for her, and they weren't even consulting her anymore. She hated the council—not once could she recall hearing anyone come out of a council meeting saying: 'that went well.' But she knew that they would not let Sasuke participate in the exam if they didn't have someone standing by, and she knew Sasuke had been training hard for months now. Additionally, there was no reason for there not to be an ANBU on guard nearby. She had to let this go down this way, there was no better alternative.

"Fine," Tsunade said, glaring at the three of them, "But I want you to pick someone who can trust Sasuke just as they would trust anyone

else. Now, if you'll excuse me, I am now very late for my previous engagement."

And before anyone could say anything to her, she stormed from the room, slamming the door behind her.

"Sasuke?" Sakura was calling throughout the house, her hakama robes billowing about her legs as she searched the house for the Uchiha who owned the property. She could have sworn he was here a few minutes ago.

She rushed about the home, scrambling to get things together last minute while looking for Sasuke, struggling with getting her hair clips to hold back the stubborn strands of pink hair as she moved, hoping that she didn't look lopsided. She almost tripped over the long garment as she moved, smacking her elbow against the doorframe as she went. Where was that spiky haired idiot? She let out a quiet curse over her throbbing elbow before going down the hall to the back entry of the house. Surely he wouldn't have left, not already. She frowned when she saw his shoes missing—he wouldn't have gone far, not Sasuke. Sasuke wasn't one to just up and leave without notice.

' *Disregarding the time when he...* ' she discarded the thought before it could finish. Sasuke wasn't like that anymore.

She looked both ways when she opened the door, hoping to see him in the yard waiting for her with an impatient look on his face. She had half prepared a retort, going to say that it was *her* graduation, and he shouldn't be the one telling her to hurry. But she never got a chance to use them, as he was not there. She did notice however that not far from her was the door that led to the room that Sasuke's parents had died in, and the door was slightly ajar. Instantly she was alarmed and rushed across the wooden planks—not matter the reason it was always bad when it had to do with that room.

She swung the door open hurriedly, almost stumbling as she stopped. He was right there, standing at the other end of the room, a large ornate cabinet open in front of him.

She had barely stopped when his name left her automatically, "Sasuke?"

He turned around towards her, his eyes moving to look in her direction...and then they locked with hers. She froze instantly, in shock, her own eyes widening slowly, her mouth open to speak, but words failed her. Obsidian encountered viridian and held them steady, the dark iris suspending hers in a spell. He had had sight for a couple weeks now, yet this was the first time in three and a half years that she saw him observe her. No—for some reason, something felt different than the other times he had looked at her. For the first time, he was looking at her, and actually seeing her.

'... I love you...'

The words swirled around in her head, and formed on the threshold of her lips, but they never moved—they were never uttered. When she saw him, like this, she knew the reason why she loved him.

"Sakura, you look very pale," he told her, concern marring his face.

She looked pale, she thought with wonderment—he could see it. It wasn't until a few seconds later that she knew that she was scarcely breathing, she was so captivated by that gaze, so enwrapped in it.

"I..."

'... love you...'

"...don't think you need the Sharingan to trap people to your will—you've caught me already," she said, remembering to breathe, though her voice still sounded breathless.

He gave her a puzzled look, "What are you talking about?"

She gave her head a shake. "Nothing," she said, willing the spell on her to break, "Hi. I was looking for you. Are you almost ready to go?"

"Almost," he replied, turning around briefly to close the cabinet behind him. He crossed the room to leave, and Sakura noticed he pointedly avoided the room's center, "I need to get my shoes."

"Okay. ...Hey, Sasuke?" she called, and he stopped and looked over his shoulder, "What I was saying before—I'm glad that you can see again."

"I am too," he replied after a pause.

Probably more than she could even begin to imagine, she thought, as she watched him disappear out the door.

It was at the hospital gardens that Sasuke found himself seated to the right of Haruno Kanaye, and to the left of Hatake Kakashi, amid a large crowd of people sitting on folding chairs in the middle of a large green that he hadn't previously known existed. He was still looking interestedly around him, at the numerous decorations strung up in the leafless trees, while the Hokage stood at the podium of a large dais, reading a speech. The weather was cold, and Sakura said that she had heard it was going to rain, though with the current temperature, it was probably going to snow. Everyone was dressed like it was going to snow, including himself. On the other side of Kanaye, Sasuke could see Sakura's mother dressed in a kimono, with a scarf and jacket pulled over top. Kanaye himself was dressed in a thick winter coat with a fur trimming on the edge of the hood—which Sasuke thought looked rather ridiculous, and also seemed to be the only one who thought so, as many people had complimented Sakura's older brother that day. Kakashi was wearing a thicker jounin vest, and covering his usual facemask, a thick scarf was wrapped around his neck. And Naruto, who was sitting on the far side of Kakashi from Sasuke, was wearing a thick jacket as well—lacking the fur trimming—and wearing the scarf the Hyuuga girl had made for him.

A chill wind blew over the crowd, causing a collective shiver from the group, and causing the Hokage's papers to rustle loudly. Sasuke wasn't paying attention to what was being said, though he had tried to earlier, but he merely got lost in the medical lingo, and the talk of "numbers of years in the program" and other things he was not familiar with.

"I did some research," Kakashi muttered quietly to the rest of them, "And according to the records in the library, Sakura's the youngest graduate since the program started."

Sasuke didn't say anything to this, but raised his eyebrows a little in surprise; Kanaye looked over at Kakashi, "You're kidding. Sakura's pretty smart, but I didn't know that she was good enough to beat historical records in the 'early graduation' category."

"Give Sakura-chan more credit," Naruto whispered, giving Kanaye a stern look, "She's your sister, and no doubt smarter than you are!"

"Exactly," Kanaye replied, "Wait..."

In the background, the Hokage had finished her speech and Shizune had come up to the podium to begin reading names. A couple of assistants stood by with a number of certificates to hand to the Hokage to present.

"There was one other person who probably would have graduated around the same age," Kakashi said offhandedly, ignoring the exchange between Naruto and Kanaye.

"I take it that they didn't make it?" Kanaye commented, and Kakashi shook his head.

"Who was it?" Sakura's mother asked, picking up on the conversation, and looking over as the Hokage's secretary began reading out names that started with the vowels: a, i, u, e, and o.

"It's not so much that he didn't make it, but that his talent went undiscovered until it was too late and he became a traitor," Kakashi said offhandedly, and Sasuke felt at least two sets of eyes flick to him reflexively at the word 'traitor', "It was Yakushi Kabuto."

Sasuke felt his insides tense for a minute, remembering Kabuto back at Oto. Thankfully he barely remembered the cruel experiments—some of the remaining, and convenient, holes in his memory—but he remembered the cruelty, and some of the bodies. Being rather moody in temperament, Sasuke could quite honestly say that he believed the man to be bipolar. One minute he was chatting politely with someone, and the next, the door to his lab was shut, and screams could be heard. Sasuke preferred to avoid those halls if he could get away with it unnoticed. There were just some things that should not be done to human beings.

"I remember him," Kanaye said after a moment's thought, and Sasuke's head jerked up with surprise, "He was in my class...I remember thinking he looked like a twerp."

Naruto snorted at this, and a number of people around them turned to look at the boy briefly. Sasuke allowed a wry smile to pass over his mouth, as Kanaye's description was rather accurate.

"Never showed much promise in class, and if I recall he was frequently picked on," Kanaye said continued quietly, "Don't know how he ever made it to genin."

"He was much more than met the eye," Kakashi said darkly, "Much like Sakura is—but in a different manner, of course."

"I still find it hard to believe that he killed those ANBU at the Chuunin Exam three and a half years ago," Sakura's mother said disbelievingly, "It frustrated Kisho for weeks, too."

"For him, that was easy," Sasuke muttered, speaking for the first time since the conversation had arisen, "His brilliance is one of his weapons in his cruelty, and his cunning is what makes people trust

him. Kabuto is very talented, but that is also what makes him very dangerous. He makes Kanaye's skill with the katana look like he's swinging a stick around aimlessly."

"I'm going to take offense to that statement," Kanaye said with a mocking pout, "Saying the twerp makes me look like I'm dancing with a stick...well, my katana is bigger than his scalpel."

"Getting on the wrong end of his scalpel is a very bad thing," Sasuke replied, giving the older Haruno sibling a look that warned him not to joke about this, "If you don't want to live the rest of your days in agony, I suggest you avoid it."

"Okay, okay. I get it," Kanaye said sheepishly, "Geez, Emo Prince, you take everything so seriously."

"Kanaye's just offended about your katana remark because he's compensating for something," Naruto remarked quietly, a devious grin on his face.

"Oi, Naruto," Kanaye whispered back, "After the ceremony it was foretold that there will be a fated meeting between my foot and your ass."

"Okay, you two, just stop it," Sakura's mother whispered with a frown.

There was silence for a time, and Sasuke listened with mild boredom as the last names 'ka' through 'so' were read. Sakura was one of the graduates who had still yet to receive her certificate, and was standing rigidly against the cold wind clustered among the rest of the students. None of this could be seen visually, but he could sense their chakra signatures, and it seemed that they had linked hands and were sharing their chakra for warmth, as their useable chakra was flowing through them collectively. The way Sasuke sensed it, it created a like a blurred picture in his mind, one where the people were still recognizable, but it gave everyone a windswept

appearance. Sakura was stuck somewhere in the middle of the group, her chakra signature the most obvious and familiar to him.

Finally the section of 'ha' through 'ho' was being read, and he could sense her chakra signature's mood change. The overlying mood of ease with the twinge of melancholy suddenly had a trace of nervousness as her name was called. Beside him, he could hear Kanaye and Sakura's mother begin clapping with twice as much vigor as he and Kakashi did, and Naruto began clapping so hard that it was amazing that his hands didn't fly off. Sasuke however was so focused on Sakura as she walked across the stage, her hakama robes fluttering around her ankles, that he barely noticed anything else. The smile on her face as she received the paper the Hokage gave her, and the look of pride on her face—her chakra signature flared with an overwhelming sense of accomplishment.

And as everyone else around him was clapping enthusiastically, his clapping slowed and then stopped. He watched her as she cast a smile towards where the group of them were sitting, and he could have sworn then that when she did so, she had looked directly at him before disappearing off the other end of the stage. And while people around him were clapping and Kanaye let out a whistle, Sasuke knew that right then, he was the only one who knew how overjoyed she felt.

Sakura dashed through the dispersed crowds of people mingling with all the other graduating students, holding the fancy protective binder for her certificate over her head as the first few offensive raindrops began raining down on her head. She loved winter, it was her favourite season, but she hated the freezing rain that came more frequently than the snows. All the graduates around her were older than her, and she felt a little out of place, even knowing that she was as good as any of them—better, according to Tsunade. But she knew that they were all the same here, with proud friends and families and their beloveds...

She spotted her party not far from her, and she heartily made her way over to them. She saw her mother and brother, Kakashi, and Naruto—her brother had pulled his hood up, and her mother was holding her jacket over her head; Naruto and Kakashi were just getting wet. Smiling, she ran up to the four of them, though inwardly she wondered where Sasuke was. Naruto was the first to spot her as she dashed through the crowds, and before she could do anything, he grabbed her into a bear hug.

"Congratulations, Sakura-chan!" he shouted enthusiastically, spinning her around once.

"Hey! The first bear hug is reserved for the brother!" Kanaye complained, prying Naruto off of her and latching onto her instead, "Congrats, you. Didn't think you had it in you."

Sakura was about to retort that she could prove it to him by breaking something and healing it, when her mother approached the two of them.

"Now, Kanaye, you know that mothers take precedence over brothers no matter what," she said calmly, a smile on her face.

"Right, sorry, Mom," Kanaye smiled, letting go of Sakura.

Her mother hugged her next, and hugged her the tightest—considering she had already been hugged by Naruto, it was saying something. She wrapped her arms around her mom and hugged her back, smiling quietly. She remembered her mother had hugged her like this on the day that she had graduated from the Academy, and when she had first returned home after passing the Chuunin Exam.

"I'm so proud of you," her mother said in that way that mothers always said those words without making them sound corny—it was a natural talent that mothers seemed to possess, "I only wish your father could have been here. I know, he would have been proud of you, too."

"He still might be able to, Mom," Sakura whispered back—it tore her that her mother was already treating her father like he was dead.

The fact that her father's wife, the woman he loved most in the world, had given up on her soul mate, hurt Sakura. She hadn't accepted her father as dead yet—she was like that. Until there was evidence to prove that he would never be coming back, that it was impossible, she would never give up. She once over heard Kakashi telling someone-or-other that she must have spent too much time around Naruto, because she had become the kind of person who wouldn't give up even if everyone else had—even if she was *supposed* to give up by that point. Just like Naruto, she hadn't given up on Sasuke, not once...not even on the day that she treated him like he was dead—she had vowed to find a way to extract Orochimaru's soul from his body. She had never had to do such a thing, thankfully, but... Even in death, she hadn't given up on him.

She opened her eyes and peered at the fox faced boy who was standing behind her mother. She knew there would always be at least one other person who would never give up, who would never stop believing—she wasn't alone. She let go of her mother and smiled sadly at her, trying not to convey the hurt that she felt from her mother's comment. Though, she had a feeling her mother saw right through her, giving her a very perceptive look. Before her mother could comment, Sakura was rescued by Kakashi, who ruffled her hair affectionately.

"Well done, Sakura," he said, the corner of his visible eye crinkling into a crow's-foot, "I always knew that your ability to control you chakra so well would come in handy."

"Thank you, Kakashi-sensei. I had a lot of help getting to where I am now," she replied brightly, and then after a moment of looking around, asked: "Where's Sasuke?"

"I don't know," Kanaye said ponderingly, "He up and disappeared the instant the ceremony was over. I thought maybe he needed to use the bathroom or something, but I thought he'd be back by now."

"Oh, Sakura, you shouldn't use your certificate cover as a shield against the rain," her mother suddenly fussed, taking the thick slab from her, and then frowned again, "But the rain will ruin your hakama."

The rain suddenly ceased to pelt Sakura with its watery droplets, shortly after she saw her mother look over her shoulder. Looking upwards, she saw the underside of an umbrella canopy being held over her head, and looking to her left, she saw Sasuke, gazing steadily back at her. Under his arm were tucked four more umbrellas. He opened his mouth to say something, when he was rudely interrupted.

"Umbrellas, thank the heavens!" Kanaye exclaimed lunging for one.

"The heavens are what is giving you the rain in the first place," Naruto remarked, crossing his arms, not making any movement to grab an umbrella.

"Thank you, Sasuke," Sakura's mother remarked kindly, taking one from him, "That was very thoughtful of you."

"I wondered if they might have had some at the reception desk," he said calmly, "And I hurried so that I could borrow some before other people got the same idea."

"Well, we're pretty wet already, but at least we won't be soaked," Kakashi said lightly, "Naruto, aren't you going to take one?"

"Naw, I'm tough enough to withstand getting a little wet," Naruto remarked smartly, grinning at his sensei, "Besides, the last one should be for Sakura-chan. There's only enough for five."

"She's quite dry where she is right now, dobe," Sasuke remarked with a smirk, tossing the last umbrella at Naruto, who barely caught it before it hit him in the face.

"Hey! Well, not if you're standing under it, too," Naruto retorted, "You're hogging most of the space!"

Sasuke promptly linked his arm with hers, and she couldn't help but smile at the action. It seemed so atypical for the two of them to be walking apart after he had lost his sight, and still, nearly fourth months since he had developed the technique of his chakra senses, the habit had still carried over. Of course they'd be walking together under the same umbrella, whatever made Naruto think otherwise?

"Good enough for you, dobe?" Sasuke asked, a smirk playing on his lips.

Naruto opened his mouth to argue, but was cut off instead by Kakashi, "Let it go, Naruto—we're all dry, or *drier*, and hopefully the rain will let up by the time we're done lunch."

"Lunch?" Sakura asked, there had been no previous mention of this to her, though when she looked at Sasuke, the news didn't seem new to him.

Her mother smiled, "I made lunch to celebrate. Come on, let's go back to the house."

"I'm so hungry, I could eat Naruto," Kanaye remarked, marching off in the lead.

"Well, I'm so hungry I could eat you *and* Kakashi-sensei," Naruto replied, jogging after him.

"Well, I'm not nearly hungry enough to be so desperate as to touch either of you with a fork," Kakashi replied neatly, pulling out his book while tailing after the two of them.

"Well, hopefully there will be enough food that we won't have to resort to eating each other," Sakura's mother quipped following after.

When Sakura moved to follow the four of them, Sasuke's arm on hers tugged slightly holding her back. She gave him a quizzical look, wondering why on earth he wasn't moving forwards too. Once she had come to a complete stop, he took a step forwards, and leaning in towards her ear, he whispered one word. And looking back on the day of her graduation, years from now, she would say that the best part of the day wasn't the graduation, nor was it the feast that followed—it was that one word from him, that made the day wonderful.

"Congratulations."

A/N: Whoo hoo! Done done done done done. And then there's the next chapter to move onto. Okay. It's official. Mini arc complete. Actually Chuunin Exam commence next chapter! Yay! (dances) Now, I feel that I had some informative revelation of why Kanaye is such an important character to me, but I forgot. This, my friends, is what happens when you don't write things down.(sigh)

IMPORTANT NOTICE: I will not be updating again until **August 6, 2008** due to family vacation time. If you want a more detailed reason, see A/N at top.

Chapter 49

A/N: SORRY IT'S LATE!! THE INTERNET AT MY HOUSE DIED AND I HAD TO DRIVE TO MY UNIVERSITY TO STEAL THE WiFi! (cries) I want my internet back. D:

Thank you to everyone who wished me a wonderful trip in Japan—I had a great time, and it was the first time I'd had my birthday overseas. It was so bloody hot in Tokyo. I got to eat authentic ramen at a really well known ramen shop, and now I can understand why Naruto eats it every day. It's so good. (drools) And guess what—I met Kishimoto Masashi!! *Just kidding* . XD I'll make it my goal to find him next time I go. XD Happy birthday to all those who said their birthdays would be around the time I put this out for you to read. And I hope the wait was worth it.

This chapter contains Pre-Chuunin Exam Festival fun! And I've finally decided what I'm going to do with Shikamaru and Ino's relationships, though they don't really play a big role here, so I'm not going to announce what I've decided. And I suppose this chapter is kinda fanservice because I ended up including most people's favourite pairings on the side: NaruHina, NejiTen, ShikaIno, ShikaTema, and there will be an interaction with Ino with someone else. Who? You'll see. :p

P.S. Not trying to antagonize Temari at all when you meet her. It's told from Ino's point of view, and in her eyes, Temari is an antagonist. :P I actually really like Temari.

Warning: Loooooooooonnnnnnngggggg!! :

Chapter Forty-Nine: Snapshots

"Thanks for helping me with the groceries this morning, Naruto," Sakura said with a smile to her loudmouthed teammate.

"No problem, Sakura-chan," Naruto said with a wide grin, "You know I'll do anything you need me to, anytime."

"Thanks," she uttered, not sure what to say to this exactly, "I still feel bad having to ask you though. It's been so hectic ever since the graduation ceremony, as the Chuunin Exam officially begins at the end of this week. I haven't had time to grocery shopping, and the only reason I'm doing it so early in the morning is because in an hour I have to go to the hospital to clean out my office space."

"Really?" Naruto asked, looking puzzled, "Are they throwing you out?"

She laughed, "No, not exactly. I'm going to be a field medic, meaning that unless for some reason that I can't go out on missions, I won't be working at the hospital that much anymore. Hopefully once Sasuke passes the Chuunin Exam we can go back to our regular mission schedule."

"Yeah, it's been pretty boring without having anything to do," Naruto said, looking at the sky in a disgruntled manner, like he was blaming God or something for the lack of missions, "He'd better pass."

"He will," Sakura said confidently, looking up at the sky as well, the sun very low on the eastern horizon, "He's been working so hard for this, harder than I ever remember him working before—and considering all he's been through, and accomplished, some heads will roll if he doesn't pass."

"But still, I can't believe he chose training over helping you with groceries," Naruto commented, shaking his head, "After all these months, he still can't treat you with courtesy?"

"I'd hardly call you the master of courtesy, Naruto," Sakura said with a frown, "But he didn't choose training over shopping—he doesn't

even know that we went, he's still asleep."

"What?" Naruto asked, looking incredulous, "Slacking off?! The Exam starts in three days! If anything, he should be training harder than usual."

"He *has* been. That's why he's asleep right now. He was so tired yesterday he just fell on the bed and went to sleep. I think *you* were the last one to train with him yesterday, what on earth did you do to him?" Sakura said with a berating tone, "And besides, I could have woken him—he probably would have wanted that, but he was so exhausted, I thought it would have been cruel. Not to mention, he's not much of a morning person."

"Ugh, I know," Naruto said, obviously recalling some long-past event, "Remember that one mission when he got so mad at me one morning that he activated his Sharingan just so he could make sure he hit me when he threw that...what was it again?"

"It was his eating knife," Sakura said, recalling the same particular incident, "It was a nice shot, I have to admit; you're lucky he was half asleep so it hit your sleeve instead of your arm. I hardly blame him though, I wouldn't have interpreted Kakashi-sensei's: 'Naruto, go wake up Sasuke,' as 'go poke him continuously'."

"Well, at the time, the two were easily confused," Naruto said defensively, making a disgruntled face, "He should be more considerate of you though, Sakura-chan, in the mornings that is."

"He is, actually. I know he doesn't want to be up, but he gets up without complaining, and while I can just sense his inward complaining, he doesn't voice it."

"Of course not. Does Sasuke voice *anything*?" Naruto laughed.

She found herself smiling, "He didn't used to... I think since he's been brought back, things have changed a lot for him. It makes me happy."

"You still really love him, don't you?" Naruto commented after a pause.

"Yeah," Sakura replied mellowly, smiling softly. She hadn't really told anyone that she did, but it wasn't exactly the world's best-kept secret. She didn't mind telling Naruto though, "Why mention this now?"

Naruto shrugged lightly, and then stopped on the street corner. They were near the Hokage's Tower, and Naruto's gaze was rest upon it, looking up and beyond to the cliff with the Great Stone Faces carved into it. Sakura stopped too; looking at him pensively, wondering what he was going to say. People who were walking behind them almost crashed into them as they stopped and wandered around, grumbling as they went. There was a soft nostalgic smile on Naruto's face, and when he looked at her, his eyes were affectionate.

"You know, Sakura-chan, I liked you for a long time before I got to know Hinata-chan better. I loved you, or thought I did," Naruto said calmly, his voice serious in a way that she had only seen it a couple times before.

"I know," she replied, looking away, picking her words carefully, "I wasn't fair to you about it, I know, clinging to hopes of Sasuke when chances were low. But I didn't want to try being with you because I knew it would even less fair to you for me to go out with you when I didn't love you in the way you wanted me to. I'm sorry, Naruto."

He shook his head, "Don't be sorry, Sakura-chan. It's behind us now, and I have Hinata-chan, which is probably the best thing that has ever happened to me. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I still love you, but I realize it's not the in the way that I thought I did. I don't feel the same way about you like I do with Hinata-chan. I love you in the way that I would if you were my sister, just like Sasuke is my brother."

"I loved you in the same way, Naruto," Sakura said, finally returning his gaze, "I still do. To me, you're my second brother, and I don't

know what I'd do without you. But just like you love Hinata, I love Sasuke, and I don't know if that's ever going to change."

"I had always wanted to make you happy, to be the one next to you, doing whatever it took to make you smile," Naruto said, rubbing the back of his head, "But it seems that miraculously Sasuke is doing it for me. You're very strong, Sakura-chan. You didn't need me to make you smile or to protect you, and that's okay. I've found someone who does, and I think things turned out better this way."

"You've helped me more than you give yourself credit for, Naruto," Sakura said sternly, "You were my brother, remember? You helped me like any member of my family did. Especially when things were the roughest for me."

"Well, don't forget then that your brother is still here for you, no matter what," he said pointing his thumb at his chest, and she felt her face soften a bit, "And like all good brothers, he wants his sister to be happy."

"I am happy, Naruto," she said reassuringly, "I have everything I could ever want right now."

Naruto started walking forwards again. "Not everything," she heard him say quietly.

Sasuke held the sheet of paper up in front of him, squinting over the information written on it for what must have been the fiftieth time that day. It was the registration sheet that he was required to fill out before he was allowed to participate, and he was just making sure that all the information was correct (again) before giving it to Kakashi, who, as usual, was late meeting him. There was only one place on the sheet that he was having difficulty figuring out how to fill out, and he wanted to ask Kakashi about it. There was only the issue of Kakashi not being there.

He looked up from the paper and sighed with frustration, looking around vainly for his sensei. Sakura was waiting at home for him, and he needed to get this over with quickly. Sakura had insisted that they attend the New Year's/Pre-Chuunin Exam Festival this year, which meant formal robes, and time preparing for the Festival. Sasuke hadn't participated in the festival the first time, not liking formal events, and spent time training instead. But Sakura said that *everyone* was going, and they were going to meet as a group, so he *had* to come. He didn't really want to go, not liking the crowds, or the bright colours—not that he could see them very well anyways—and the light bouncy music. But more and more often he found himself relenting to Sakura's requests, he somehow couldn't say no anymore.

It wasn't like she was asking for anything unreasonable, so he supposed he didn't mind so much. The unidentifiable feeling he had frequently felt around her was now becoming a constant occurrence, and that had him puzzled as well, more than concerned. It wasn't like it was an unpleasant feeling either, though he didn't know why he only felt it around Sakura, and not anyone else. He was also too afraid to dwell on it too much, in case he found out.

"Been standing there long?" came the telltale voice of Kakashi from above him, his chakra signature appearing suddenly as he appeared in a cloud of smoke.

"What do you think?" Sasuke replied automatically, looking up into the tree. Why the laid-back jounin always appeared in trees, he never knew.

"Yes well, I'm sorry for being late. You see, on the way I ran into Anko, who was just heading off to grab a bite to eat, and she asked me I wanted to come along, and having not eaten yet I—" Kakashi started, but never got to finish.

"I wish you would just tell the truth about being late, instead of coming up with lousy excuses," Sasuke grumbled, rolling his eyes.

"I am! I did meet Anko along the way, and she wanted—"

"Right," Sasuke said with a dismissive air, "Are you going to come down out of the tree so I can talk to you properly or not?"

Kakashi muttered to himself as he leapt down from the tree, and while Sasuke caught every word of it, he didn't really pay any attention to what was said. Instead, he gave the registration sheet over to his sensei rather forcefully, crossing his arms impatiently. Kakashi's visible eye scanned over the sheet lazily, and then looked at Sasuke.

"What seems to be the problem?" Kakashi asked.

"The section where you are supposed to list your teammates—I don't have any, currently," Sasuke replied in a subdued manner, "Both Naruto and Sakura are already Chuunin."

"Don't worry about that, stuff like this happens all the time," Kakashi said, folding up the piece of paper and putting it in a vest pocket, "Sometimes a teammate dies before the exam can be taken, or just like in your case, teammates have already passed. I will make arrangements so that you will have a team for the exam, though I doubt you'll be with anyone you know."

"That's fine," Sasuke replied. In Oto, he had known no one very well, and when he was paired up with people on missions, he was often trusting people he didn't know or truly trust. While he was required to work together with them, and they worked together well, he knew that they trusted him as much as he trusted them. And since he had always kept his guard up to prepare himself in case any of them decided to stab him in the back, that just showed how much they trusted him. At least in this case, he was going to be partnered with people who had less sinister intentions.

"You'll probably end up doing the written portion without a team at first though. But you'll definitely have some teammates in time for the Forest of Death," Kakashi told him, "Is there anything else?"

Sasuke shook his head, "Just let me know when I have a team."

"Alright, ja mata, ne," Kakashi said with a slight wave and then disappeared in a cloud of smoke again.

Sasuke waited outside the back door of the house, his arms crossed and his eyes closed. He was garbed, much to his reluctance, in a men's kimono—one that had once belonged to his father. He hadn't wanted to dress formally for the festival, and would have much rather gone in his normal attire, but Sakura had insisted since it was the first day of the festival it was a special occasion. Not to mention that they had merged the Pre-Chuunin Exam Festival with the New Year's festival, as not to disrupt the exam, she said, so that made it an even more special occasion. Or so she said. Sasuke didn't care either way.

He rolled his shoulders slightly, feeling slightly uncomfortable in the garb—not that it was difficult to move in, he just wasn't used to so much fabric on his shoulders, he felt heavy. He opened his eyes to look at it, and flicked off a stray thread off the surface. It was navy blue—or so Sakura had told him, as his colour vision was still somewhat poor—he wasn't able to tell the navy blue colour apart from a grey one. He didn't really remember this kimono; the only time when he had seen his father in formal wear before was when he himself was probably no older than four or five years old. To think that now he was as tall as his father was, and could wear his kimono—it boggled his mind just a little bit.

One of the two chakra signatures left in the house moved towards him and shortly the door opened next to him. He looked up at Sakura's mother as she exited, and she gave him a smile. Sakura's mother had come over to help Sakura get into her kimono—which apparently was a very difficult job, seeing as the two of them had taken just under half an hour just now. Sasuke had offered Sakura his assistance but she had only laughed and said that while she appreciated the offer, she didn't think he knew how to tie a room-long obi sash properly.

"Sakura's just fixing up her hair right now, and she'll be ready to go soon," the woman said with a kindly smile, "You look very dashing by the way."

"Thanks," Sasuke replied somewhat awkwardly; he couldn't hardly remember the last time he'd seen his father dressed up formally, but he couldn't remember ever being dressed formally at all. He wasn't used to being paid compliments like that.

"Did it belong to your father?" she asked, and he gave a mute nod, "It's in good condition, and the craftsmanship is very nice."

Sasuke looked down at the fabric again. Silver-stitched koi fish swam across the dark folds winding themselves around the black sash around his middle. An Uchiha insignia was sewn on the back of the collar at the back of his neck, and a simple white under robe contrasted the shadowy colour, making him not seem too dark. It was nice, he supposed, it wasn't overly elaborate or fancy—it was simple enough for his tastes.

"I can't remember him wearing it," Sasuke said smoothing out a crease through one of the fish; the one time he remembered his father dressing up fancily, he remembered him wearing something different.

Sakura's chakra signature removed itself from the bathroom area and began wandering towards them, seeming finally done with her hair. Sasuke let out an inward sigh of impatience.

' *Finally,* ' he thought to himself.

"Well, I'm sure it looked just as nice on him as it does on you," Sakura's mother said kindly, oblivious so Sakura's approach.

"Okay, I think I'm ready," came Sakura's voice from inside, standing just inside the door, "Just let me get my shoes on."

"Well, don't you look lovely," Sakura's mother said, a smile on her face.

Curious, Sasuke looked towards the door, but couldn't quite see Sakura. He straightened up off the wall to get a better look, but he needn't have bothered, Sakura exiting at that precise moment. Sasuke was momentarily caught unawares when she stepped into his view—her appearance was so much different than what he was used to. A long pale pink kimono clung to her body, falling downwards and fading into a shade of cherry red. The white circle that was the symbol of the Haruno clan decorated the bottom edge of the kimono, and above it was stitched a pattern of golden dragonflies skimming across a design of still water. The white edge of her under robe was just visible near her neck down the front a little before disappearing at the v-neckline. The white obi sash was wrapped around her petite waist, tied at the back in a large bow, and in her hand she held a small folded fan. Her hair wasn't all that different, except she had parted it to the side and stuck some simple, yet elegant hair clips into it, making her look a little older, more mature.

"Thanks, Mom," Sakura said, smiling at her mother, "And thanks for your help. I don't think I'd ever had gotten this on if it weren't for you."

"No problem, sweetie," Sakura's mother said affectionately, "I always loved this time of year especially when the Chuunin Exams were on. Your father and I would go out for dinner every time. I can understand why you want to go out tonight."

It was then that Sakura looked at him, smiling softly, "Don't think I haven't noticed that you haven't said anything yet."

"He's just shocked into silence by your overwhelming beauty," Sakura's mother said playfully.

Sasuke cleared his throat, a smirk coming to his lips, "Maybe."

"Well, I'll take that ambiguousness as a compliment," Sakura said confidently, "Shall we go? The rest are probably waiting for us—it took a little longer than I anticipated."

Sasuke gave a nod and took her arm without much thought, clasping his hand with hers. Sakura looked back towards her mother.

"Do you want to come along, Mom?"

"No, that's alright, honey, I've got other plans this evening," she replied sweetly, "I'll see you later. Okay? You two have a good time."

"Alright, we'll see you later then," Sakura said with a wave as Sasuke tugged insistently on her arm, leading her around the corner of the house and out of sight.

"What do you mean, 'no'?" Ino demanded with her hands on her hips, looking Shikamaru square in the eye, a displeased look glinting behind her own.

"I meant no," Shikamaru replied, shoving his hands in his pockets in a stubborn manner.

"Well, why ever not?" Ino demanded, shifting her hands from her hips and crossing them over her chest.

"Ino, I'm not going to spend my money playing some ridiculous game just so you can win a stuffed animal," Shikamaru stated, rolling his eyes heavenwards, "That's for boyfriends, and lovers, and people like that, to do."

"Well, Naruto's doing it for Hinata," Ino said, making a gesture to a nearby stand where Naruto could be seen expertly throwing rings at some target out of sight, Hinata standing close to him, observing.

"That's because Hinata's his *girlfriend* , Ino," Shikamaru replied, sounding almost exasperated—almost. Just enough for Ino to

comfortably ignore.

"What's your point?" she asked; it was her way to be this direct, blatant, and pushy. She knew Shikamaru didn't consider her his girlfriend, but if she imposed the idea on him insistently enough, he'd have to give in at some time. He cared about her, she was certain of it, he just didn't realize how much yet.

"Didn't I just say? The point is that you're not my girlfriend," Shikamaru responded with irritation, "Maybe if you were, I'd do it, but even then I don't know..."

"Well, why can't you do it anyways, Shika-kun?" Ino asked, giving him what she hoped was an adorable, yet pleading look.

"Ino, if it weren't for you, I wouldn't even be here," he replied, "You know I usually have so much stuff with the Exams going on that I'm usually too sick of it to want to go to the festival. I only came because you insisted—you said it was *New Years*, and told me that *everyone* else would be coming. So far we've only run into Naruto and Hinata."

"The rest are coming. Sakura promised she and Sasuke would come, and I know for a fact she'll be the only one to get him to come. And Neji wouldn't deny Ten Ten his company here, she wouldn't want to go alone, and he'd do anything for her. He adores her—it's hardly a secret," Ino assured him.

"What I'm saying is: I'm here—now. What more do you want from me?" he sighed.

"For you to win me a door prize," Ino answered without missing a beat, "And you know what? Since you're being so fussy about it, I've decided that tonight I'm designating you as my honorary boyfriend."

"What? Why should I have to agree to this?" Shikamaru asked, looking both startled and disgruntled.

"Because I said so," Ino shot back, grabbing his arm, leading him to the nearest stand.

"Why can't Chouji be the honorary boyfriend?" he asked, barely putting up resistance, probably knowing he wasn't going to get out of it if he tried.

"Because. I. Said. So."

"...Troublesome."

It was half an hour before Sasuke and Sakura arrived at the grounds where the festival was being held. Being attired in formalwear meant that there was no hurrying via leaping across rooftops and it was very difficult trying to hurry with the excess fabric, but Sakura didn't mind. She was content walking happily arm in arm with Sasuke down the empty roads of Konoha, the light chatter flowing between them. She had agreed with Ino, Ten Ten and Hinata to head to the festival together and they would all meet with their respective significant others—regardless of if those significant others knew how significant they were.

The trip down was rather uneventful, and they didn't see all that many people until they arrived on the outside of the grounds of the festivities. Sakura couldn't stop turning her head in every direction looking at all the different stands and decorations scattered over the grounds. The colour red could be seen everywhere it seemed, and every building had a string of coloured lights strung from it to the building across the street from it.

There were many stands set up, and the population became denser as they traveled inwards. There was everything from concession stands to food stands. Peddlers could be seen here and there, and Sakura found herself grow excited, wanting to partake in the events. Not until they met up with the others, she reminded herself, but she still felt a bubble of excitement in her.

As they approached the area where they were supposed to meet, Sakura could see nobody there; were they really that late? Had everyone given up on them and left to partake in their festive fun without her and Sasuke? Her face fell. She hadn't realized how late they were.

"Where is everyone?" she asked aloud. It was more a rhetorical question, but as with most rhetorical questions, Sasuke answered anyway.

"The dobe and the Hyuuga girl are over there," he said, pointing, "Ino and Nara Shikamaru are over there, by that stand, Hyuuga Neji and the Ten Ten girl are there by that concession stand."

Sakura opened her mouth to ask how on earth he knew, but then shut it hurriedly. Chakra signatures, right. Well, at least they hadn't wandered far, but she couldn't blame them for moving—they were rather late. It was Ten Ten who spotted them first; grabbing Neji's arm, she excitedly pointed them out. And after Neji had shoved some money into the vendor's hand, they quickly hurried over, Ten Ten in the lead.

"You guys finally came!" Ten Ten exclaimed enthusiastically, grinning.

"Yeah, sorry we're late, I had a couple of setbacks when putting the kimono on," Sakura replied sheepishly.

"Totally worth it, though. You look great," Ten Ten beamed.

"Thanks," Sakura retuned, "You're looking great yourself."

Ten Ten was wearing a white silk kimono with a light feather patter stitched across it in pearl hued thread. And a pale yellow obi was tied around her middle. Instead of the usual twin buns that she normally wore her hair in, Ten Ten had opted for a single bun. Neji was wearing a similar coloured kimono, white, but a scene of an ocean bottom sewn on it instead. The Hyuuga clan emblem looked quite out of place among the fish and oysters.

"Well, you're the first one to mention it,' Ten Ten said, casting Neji a pointed look, "Nobody else has said anything at all."

"If you wanted to know what I thought, you should have asked," Neji replied, giving her a quick quirk of the eyebrow.

"Fine, then. Hyuuga Neji, what do you think of how I look tonight?" Ten Ten said flatly.

"You look nice," Neji replied, and Ten Ten looked torn between wanting to smile and wanting to facepalm.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw that Sasuke looked mildly amused. She herself smiled. It was a strange relationship that Neji and Ten Ten had. They weren't officially together, but they did a lot of things together and Ten Ten had confessed that Neji had kissed her once—but she was still unsure of what they were. Sakura glanced at Sasuke again—what were *they* ? Definitely past the point of friends, or at least she thought so, but in what direction were they headed?

" 'Nice'?" Just 'nice?' You're giving me such a generic answer?" Ten Ten exclaimed then, seeming to go with neither smiling or facepalming, and swinging a paper fan at Neji's head.

Neji placidly removed himself from the fan's path, remaining unharmed, "Yes. I think in a very generic manner."

"Hmph. Well, in which case, you look very generic tonight, Neji," Ten Ten retorted, crossing her arms.

"Why thank you, Ten Ten," Neji stated with a polite air.

"That wasn't a compliment!"

"I took it as one."

"Neji!"

Neji was only like this when he was around Ten Ten, and since Sakura didn't spend much time with the both of them together, she didn't see this side of Neji very often. Sasuke, however, had never seen this aspect of Neji before—evidently—and was looking very surprised.

"Sakura! You finally arrived!" came Ino's voice as she approached from the right, "Gods, what took you so long?"

Ino's kimono was a colour of blue that matched her eyes exactly. A landscape of towering mountains was embroidered into it with royal blue thread. A matching coloured obi went around her middle. She was holding a stuffed animal that depicted a giraffe. An annoyed Shikamaru was standing next to her, wearing a dark green kimono with a forested pattern along the bottom. His arms were hanging limply by his side, the lack of pockets seeming to have proved a dilemma for him.

"Kimono trouble," Sakura offered apologetically.

Ino's eyes widened as she looked at Sasuke, "Oh, I see. I didn't know Sasuke was helping you."

Sakura felt her face go bright red, while Sasuke gave Ino a look that clearly stated: are you stupid or something? Ino looked at Sakura again, confused.

"My mother came over and helped me, actually," Sakura clarified, clearing her throat.

Before there was any more awkwardness to be added to the situation, any further elaboration was avoided in the form of Naruto, who, with his bright orange kimono, couldn't be missed a mile away. Naruto had come flying out of seemingly nowhere and tackled Sasuke—Sasuke, having his chakra senses deactivated at the time, hadn't anticipated this and naturally, the Uchiha reacted to being attacked. Only Sasuke could free himself from an attack from behind in a kimono and not look ruffled afterwards.

"The hell, dobe?" Sasuke shouted with irritation, "If you want me to beat the crap out of you, you could ask nicely and save me the trouble of getting fed up with you."

Naruto picked himself up off the ground, straightening out his citrus orange kimono—Sakura couldn't tell what was sewn on the fabric, it was too bright. "Wow, Naruto. Trying to make some people go blind are we? Sasuke just got his sight back, I'd prefer it if you didn't take it away right away," she said teasingly.

Naruto examined himself, "What d'you mean, Sakura-chan?"

"Never mind," she sighed.

"Naruto-kun, a-are you o-okay?" came the alarmed, yet still timid voice of Hinata from behind Sasuke.

Hinata was garbed in a powder purple kimono, a pattern of lilacs across the fabric in white thread. A darker purple obi was around her waist and she held a matching purple uchiwa fan.

"Yep, don't worry Hinata-chan," Naruto grinned at the timid girl, "Sasuke couldn't hurt me if he tried."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that, dobe," Sasuke said, still looking irritated.

"As much as we're all excited to see the outcome of this, let's not find out now," Sakura said stepping between the two.

"Moving slowly onwards," Ino said loudly, causing the three of them to look over at her, "Plans for the evening, anyone?"

In the end it was decided that they would all find something to eat and spend the next couple hours together, participating in activities arranged by the festival. Afterwards, people were free to do what they wished, whether it was going home or staying out until the fireworks at midnight.

"Alright, I vote we get some grub!" Ten Ten declared loudly, "Come on, Neji!"

The group began to move towards the area where all the different stands of food had been set up, and Sakura was moving forwards as well, when Sasuke froze beside her. She halted and looked at him quizzically. His eyes were closed, and a frown was etched on his face, like he was concentrating.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"I sensed a strange signature—a powerful one," he said calmly, but quietly so nobody else would hear.

"Well, there are lots of powerful shinobi coming into the village because of the exam," Sakura said in response, "What's so different about this one?"

"You don't understand. I've only sensed one signature with more chakra than this, and that was Naruto," Sasuke replied, opening his eyes, "And what's more, I've sensed this one before."

"Really? When?"

"In Kumogakure, the day we left, just after the Raikage almost had me arrested," Sasuke replied, quieter still.

It was Sakura's turn to be stunned. That could mean a number of different things—none of them good.

"Oi, what's holding you guys up? Come on!" Ino called.

Sakura sighed...they'd have to deal with this later.

Perched atop one of the rooftops over the main area where the festivities were saturated, crouched a lone figure, inky irises scanning the crowds with mild interest. There were bright coloured

lights everywhere, and lots of people dressed in different coloured kimono, milling around making certain individuals difficult to spot.

What the point of such activities were, specifically, the observer didn't really know. People came together under bright lights, and did what? Talked—about what? Why did they have to come here to do so? Played games for prizes—why do that when you could easily buy the prizes elsewhere and gain one hundred percent certainty of obtaining the object? Danced—spinning around while talking didn't seem like a form of entertainment. Buying food—could easily be made at home. Why were the lights coloured? Certainly normal white light would suffice? He didn't understand why it was necessary to wear kimono either. Why not wear what they normally wore?

The observer stood and straightened up, having been unable to locate the person he was seeking in this area of the festival. He wasn't sure if he had missed his target—it was hard to see with all the bright colours—but one thing was certain, he would be sure to find him before the evening was finished. The observer scanned the crowd again, wondering where his target would likely be. From what he heard, he could deduce that the target was much like himself, and therefore it was likely that the target was where the observer would be during a festival. The observer pondered neutrally the fact that he would be at home, which meant the target would be at home. However he had been assured that his target was present at the festival that evening. The observer had no idea where he would be if he were at a festival, instead of home.

The observer reached back over his shoulder and felt for the zipper located on a backpack strapped across his back. After tugging the zipper open, he pulled out a book that was tucked just inside the flap. Flipping through the book, scanning the pages carefully, he looked for the picture he had been studying for the past hour. It was on page fifty-eight, and a pair of faded obsidian eyes stared out of the page at the observer's own inky ones. Blankly, the observer made note of all the prominent features of the person on the page.

The picture was one that was supposedly more recent than any others—dark hair, which stuck up at the back, and eyes that were dark like his, yet were sightless when they stared out of the page. The expression was blank, and impossible to distinguish anything beyond that. The mouth was the very image of neutrality, the forehead and corners of eyes devoid of any evidence of muscle movement. The observer was an artist who used his skills in both assassination and in his free time, his eye was trained to note the subtle features of each thing he observed. The subject in the picture before him was unlike most people he had needed to seek out before—save for one other.

The observer had always been able to draw the features of those he saw, save for his own. He had never done a self-portrait in realism before, as his features were always blank and emotionless as well, it was impossible to distinguish uniqueness when there was none. The same could be held true here as well; save for the subtle hint that there was sightlessness in the eyes, the face was completely emotionless.

"Hm," the observer hummed, closing the book and tucking back inside the backpack. It was time for some reconnaissance.

Ino considered herself a very well-mannered person. She considered herself quiet, polite, kind, and self-effacing. Okay, so maybe she wasn't all that quiet—she was quite loud, and wasn't afraid to use her voice when she needed it. Many people had backed down in an argument after she had started raising her voice. It came in handy when she wanted her way and saw no other way to get it. And maybe she wasn't all that polite either—lots of less than pleasant words had often crossed her lips at her victims and she knew the power of language. But she was kind, really she was—when she felt like it. And it depended who she was dealing with, and what the circumstances were. There were some people who simply didn't deserve her kindness. And self-effacing...no, she was pushy, bossy, and overbearing. Okay, so maybe she was none of those things, but

there was one thing she was certain about, and that was that she was drop-dead gorgeous.

There were very few people in this world who were nearly as beautiful as she was. She knew she was being vain, but why hide the truth from herself? She knew her other friends were pretty, and each had one aspect she envied, but on the whole, they didn't have enough of them to add up the beauty that had been summed up in herself. No, she considered herself almost perfect—other than having to deal with the few extra pounds that would sometimes try and attack her when she wasn't paying attention.

Maybe it was because of this that Ino hated Temari so much.

Temari was one of those few people in the world that was nearly as beautiful as she was. There was something about the woman from Suna that made her gorgeous. Whether it was the shape and colour of her eyes, the colour and style of her hair, Ino didn't know, but Temari was beautiful, even Ino would begrudgingly admit it. She also had a very headstrong attitude, which matched Ino's. And what made Ino frustrated was that somehow this woman's pushy attitude had made her appear...sassy.

One thing about having someone as beautiful as you around, is that whoever is more beautiful then becomes more and more dependant on the beholder. And while Ino believed that she was clearly the more beautiful of the two, she couldn't seem to get Shikamaru to see just as clearly. Or at least that's what she thought. Shikamaru spent more time with Temari than Ino had seen him spend with any other woman—voluntarily. He even wrote to her when she wasn't bodily around. She didn't understand this behaviour, because whenever she saw Shikamaru with Temari, she seemed to boss him around.

In short, it could be said that Ino disliked Temari a lot. And it was for those reasons that when she and Shikamaru had separated from the rest of the group later that evening, that she became very displeased upon the first sight of Sabaku no Temari. Only to be further displeased when Temari caught first sight of them.

"Oi! Nara!" the blonde woman waved over at the two of them, Ino caught one look over her and already she was irritated.

Temari, as per usual, looked stunning. Dressed in a beautiful red kimono embroidered with a scene of a desert landscape, complete with a black obi, she was definitely the personification of gorgeous, and Ino couldn't stand it. At the call of his name, Shikamaru looked over lazily, and much to Ino's frustration, a lazy smile passed over his lips when he saw her. It was the first time he had smiled since he had been brought to the festival against his will.

"Hey," Shikamaru replied lazily, "I thought you said you weren't going to get involved with the exam this year."

"Yeah, well, I can still come to watch, can't I?" Temari replied with a wink, causing Ino to seethe silently.

"Ino, you remember Temari," Shikamaru said then.

"Of course. I don't think I could ever forget her," Ino replied icily, casting a dark look at Temari.

"Likewise," Temari said with a sassy-looking smirk. How Ino hated that look—Temari could be polite while being nasty, and not let it show to everyone else around her, "Ino, how are you?"

"I've been better, let me assure you," Ino replied coldly.

"Well, I hope you feel better soon," Temari replied evenly, smiling at her.

Shikamaru looked at the both of them, from Ino to Temari and back to Ino; he sighed heavily, "I don't understand you women—the words you say are so normal, but you say them with such malice. I don't get it."

"Don't be silly, Nara," Temari said with a dismissive air, "So what are you two up to this evening?"

"We were out enjoying the...sights, *together* ," Ino said with a stiff air, casting a warning glance at Temari, "Tonight, he's agreed to be my boyfriend."

The older woman only smiled at Shikamaru, "I see you *finally* got yourself a girlfriend. I just didn't think you'd pick Yamanaka."

"Eh? When did I agree to that?" Shikamaru complained folding his hands behind his head, "I don't really want to be here anyway. The colours are too bright, and the sky is too dark to watch clouds. I find festivals troublesome."

"Well, if that's the case, then you two won't mind if I tag along with you, now?" Temari said with a sweet smile.

"Yes, we would," Ino said plainly and Shikamaru turned and looked at her, a disapproving look on his face.

"Oi, what's with that, Ino? She can come along, it's not like it's a date or anything," he said; Ino frowned but didn't say anything. She had been hoping it *would* be a date. One thing was certain, she wasn't going to spend time with Temari.

"What about our agreement?" she argued, narrowing her eyes.

"I already won you a stuffed animal Ino, can't we call it even and let it go for the evening?" Shikamaru asked, sighing again, "Just let Temari come with us."

Ino looked at Temari, whose face had lost the smile and was looking genuinely confused, and then at Shikamaru, who was looking like he didn't care at all either way. This was not how she wanted the evening to turn out, but it looked like her control of the situation was slipping away faster than water through her fingertips. Anger bubbled inside of her, and a prickling sensation began to form behind her eyes. She hated not being in control, it made her feel like things would go terribly wrong in short order if she couldn't maintain her handhold. There was only one way to take control again.

"Actually, I just remembered something that I needed to do anyway," she said with a huff, "You two have fun."

And with that, she stormed off, leaving the two of them behind. She could no longer control Shikamaru's situation, but she could at least control her own. She was not going to let Temari ruin her evening, she swore, walking briskly around a corner. And most importantly, she would not cry.

It was in her hurried state of trying to retain her composure that she crashed headfirst into someone that threw her mind far away from either Shikamaru or Temari.

Hinata had never felt happier in her life. She felt her joy overflowing through her so much that she knew if she became any happier, she would probably faint dead away. That wasn't an exaggeration—it wouldn't have been the first time that she fainted from joy. But if you had told her three years ago that she would be spending New Years/Pre-Chuunin Exam Festival with Uzumaki Naruto and as his girlfriend, she would have thought you were lying or she'd have passed out from sheer bliss.

Reflecting on it, that seemed to happen a lot. She had such low blood pressure, that the slightest thing that startled her, or overwhelmed her, she was on the floor. But not tonight, she resolved, casting a glance to her left at her boyfriend, Naruto. She was going to keep conscious tonight!

The two of them were sitting in front of Ichiraku's special ramen stand that had been set up to try and comb in some new customers while the festival was on, but a special discount had been laid out for regulars. Naruto was more regular than any of the regulars—he was beyond regular, he practically lived at the ramen stand, Hinata thought with a small giggle. Naruto of course wanted to take advantage of this discount while he still had money, and Hinata could never say no to Naruto, let alone want to.

A hot bowl of steaming ramen was put down before each of them, and Hinata looked down into it. Beef ramen—her favourite.

"She gets a discount because she's your girlfriend, Naruto," the owner said, giving the orange-clad boy a wink.

"You're the best, old man," Naruto exclaimed with a wide grin, "Itadakimasu."

"Ano...what kind of ramen did you get, Naruto-kun?" Hinata asked timidly, looking over at his bowl. Within it there were a number of strange vegetables that she had never seen used in ramen before.

"I dunno. It's new, so I thought I'd get it," Naruto replied with a shrug, "You wanna try some, Hinata-chan?"

"A-a-ah, uh, um...S-sure," she stuttered, feeling her face start to get warm.

"Here," he fished around with his chopsticks and held what looked like some okra up to her face.

' I will not faint,' she thought fiercely, ' I will not faint, I will not faint, I will not faint.'

Slowly she leaned forwards opening her mouth wide. She could feel her face going redder and redder the closer she leaned to the vegetable. She was feeling lightheaded as her mouth closed over the piece of okra, but she refused to faint. She chewed slowly and then carefully swallowed. She wouldn't faint—she hadn't fainted yet, she could keep it up.

"I-It's good," she stammered out.

"That's good. I'm glad you like it, Hinata-chan!" Naruto said enthusiastically, "I can't wait to try it!"

Hinata sat silently for moment; she had eaten food off of Naruto's chopsticks and she hadn't fainted! She had just been fed by Naruto,

and she hadn't fainted! She was able to give an intelligent response, without fainting! She didn't faint! She didn't faint! She didn't—

The sound around her started to sound hollow and distant, her vision began to tunnel on the edges, her head felt light. Suddenly she was looking at the sky and she could hear Naruto's voice squawk in alarm.

"Ack! Hinata-chan!"

Hinata fainted.

The observer had long left his perch, and now was wandering through the crowds, searching. He no longer observed, so he no longer was an observer. He now sought, so rightfully he could be called a seeker. The seeker was having difficulty, the sheer number of people lowered his chances of finding what he sought. He had not intended on taking so long in finding his target, it was getting late, and the fireworks at midnight were an hour away. It was likely his target would leave after that, and while his residence could easily be found, he had standing orders not to approach the target in his domestic surroundings. He had no intention of approaching his target this evening either, he was merely here to discover what lay in waiting for him. He needed to be prepared if he were to fulfill his mission.

He stood on the corner of a street, looking aimlessly up and down it, wondering if he was going about this entirely the wrong way and wondering if he should try a different approach. He was speculating over what to do next when all of a sudden, somebody collided with him from behind. Reflexively he caught himself and spun about, his hand reaching for his knife. But he was not required to draw it.

Before him was a young woman, a woman about his age, who was knocked over on the ground. She wore a blue kimono and had long blonde hair. He squinted quizzically at her, wondering if this had been an accident or if she actually wanted something with him; she

looked up at him then, her eyes meeting his. His artist's eye noted that they were the exact same hue as her kimono, and that they were slightly glassy with unshed tears. It was a difficult thing to match two hues so precisely—she had a good eye for colour.

He took his perspective away from that of an artist and switched it to that of a strategist. The seeker was now required to deal with this situation, and had to do so accordingly. Society's current beliefs dictated that a man must be gentlemanly when confronted with this type of situation and be decisive by apologizing for his actions and assisting the woman wronged.

"Ah, sumimasen," he said politely, extending his hand towards her in what was the proper way of assisting her, "I did not mean to stand in your way."

He should also smile, he added as an afterthought, though he knew he had been unable to do it properly. He was not using it for deception or to attain anything, so perhaps it didn't make a difference whether or not he could do it properly. Right now he was merely trying to blend with the crowd.

The young woman took his hand when he smiled at her. It must have worked in some way or another, because she was looking at him in the strangest way. It took her a couple seconds to let go of his hand once she had risen to her feet, and she was still looking at him the entire time. It was like she had become physically incapable of looking away from him. She looked dazed, and the glassiness from the tears had vanished.

"No, the fault...was all mine," she replied; she must have impacted him harder than he initially thought, because she sounded winded and breathless.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, knowing that he should then express concern for her well-being.

"No, I'm fine," she replied, still sounding short of breath, "Never been better. Are you hurt, um...?"

"No, I am unharmed," he replied, uncertain of why her last sentence had trailed off. Perhaps she was injured.

"Well that's good to hear," she replied, "I'm sorry, I don't think I caught your name."

"That's because I didn't say it," the seeker replied, wondering if her hearing was off as well.

"Oh," her face fell slightly, "Well, what is it?"

"What is what?"

"Your name!"

"Oh," the seeker replied, "My name is..."

How many names had he been through in his lifetime? More than he could count off the top of his head. There were so many he could offer to her, not that it mattered either way. He could give her the name that had been assigned for this mission—it would not affect the outcome, he believed. He smiled at her again, hoping that maybe this time he would get it right so that she wouldn't look at him so strangely.

"...Sai."

"Well, Sai, I'm pleased to meet you," the woman replied, extending her hand, "I'm Yamanaka Ino."

He looked at her hand for a moment; it was a gesture of welcoming and greeting, acknowledging respect for the receiver. In social occasions it was used to engender a feeling of community and friendship. He knew the correct way to reciprocate this gesture, though he had never before done so in his life. He took her hand uncertainly and shook it.

"Yamanaka-san, please honour me with your friendship," he said, bowing slightly in the correct social gesture, giving the required reply.

She laughed, "Sai-kun, please. You mustn't be so formal. Please, call me Ino."

He froze inwardly. Informal situations. He had never had to deal with them before. He was unsure of the social bearing that an informal situation would have on his conversations with this woman and how he would interact with her. He had not expected her to be so open and friendly to him after just meeting. He would revert to being as informal as his knowledge allowed and try to remain formal enough not to offend her. (That broke Sai's brain—just a little.)

"So, Sai-kun, did you come to the festival by yourself?" the girl named Ino asked, smiling at him in a strange way—it was different from most smiles he had previously observed, and her eyes were still stuck on him.

"Yes, that is correct," he replied carefully.

"Now what is someone like you doing alone on this night of all nights?" she asked, looking mildly dissatisfied.

"I was looking for someone," he replied, trying not to give away that he felt he was quickly falling out of his league of knowledge of his type of social situation.

"Really? Well, my friends tell me that I'm a social busy-body, and that I seem to know everyone," she replied in a sweet voice, but there was something about it that made Sai unable to decipher her true intentions, "Perhaps I know this person you're looking for."

He didn't know what to say. In fact he was beginning to feel more and more unhinged as she wrapped both of her arms around one of his. This had not been covered in his ANBU training, at all. He was unsure of what to do or say to this girl now that she had dragged him

into a social setting that he was completely unfamiliar with and that she was obviously a local.

"Actually, I lost the person I came with," she said sounding mildly saddened, "So why don't I help you look? It's the least I can do, after crashing into you."

His mind was working faster than it had ever worked before. He had encountered dozens of enemies and defeated them, he had completed hundreds of missions, avoided death a number of times. Yet here he was, in Konoha, his home territory feeling more lost than he had ever been previously on the battlefield. The only thing that registered was her offer to assist him in finding his target—gathering information and using resources were the only things that faintly showed up in this situation. And he was going to cling to them.

"I would be eternally grateful if you would assist me, Ino-san," he said, but the polite air was somewhat washed away as she began dragging him off in an arbitrary direction, she didn't seem to be paying attention to what he was saying, but was more or less focused on remaining latched on to him.

"So, who're you looking for?"

It had been a while since Sasuke and Sakura had split off from the rest of the group. For the most part, they hadn't done anything but wander around, hand in hand. Which was perfectly alright with Sakura. Sasuke, of course, wasn't interested in participating in any of the game events, and neither of them were all that hungry after dinner. At first the two of them had hunted around carefully for the strange powerful chakra signature that Sasuke said that he had detected earlier, but Sasuke hadn't been able to detect it again, suggesting that the owner of the signature had left the festival.

They had gone walking around afterwards, and Sakura had bought a small present for her mother, but other than that, they had done nothing more than enjoy the sights. Sasuke, Sakura was pleased to

observe, seemed to be having a good enough time, seeing as he didn't usually enjoy this sort of thing. He had almost smiled on four occasions, and each time that had happened, Sakura felt joy well up in her.

It was as they were passing a little stand down one street that Sakura found herself asking Sasuke to do something for her for the first time that evening. The man at the stand was someone whom Sakura recognized from years ago—it was the photographer that had taken their pictures right after they had graduated as Genin; the photos for their information forms that would be kept in the village archives.

"Like your picture taken with your boyfriend, missy?" he asked, indicating to his camera and a painted backdrop of a street of Konoha at night with coloured lanterns.

"Sasuke? Can we?" she turned to him, looking up at him, and she knew her eyes were bright with excitement.

"But we're not—" he started with a look of disapproval on his face.

"I know that!" Sakura said exasperatedly, "But does that really matter? That doesn't mean we can't have our picture taken together, now does it?"

"I suppose not..." he still sounded reluctant.

"Sasuke, please? It would mean a lot to me," she said pleadingly.

"Alright," he said submitting; she knew he realized that he had been rather silly in refusing, and he was only defensive because the photographer had suggested they were together. She knew he was still nervous about the mere suggestion of it, which hurt her a little.

"Alright, stand close together there," the photographer directed, positioning them in front of the backdrop.

The man scuttled back behind his camera, adjusting the lens. Automatically, Sakura smiled at the lens, standing up a little taller.

"Sir with the messy hair, smile a little more," the photographer ordered, "The pink-haired lady is out shining you."

"Try for me, please?" Sakura said without breaking her smile.

"That's better," the photographer said, "Alright. Cheese."

Neither Sasuke nor Sakura said the word, but Sakura endeavored to make her smile nicer.

"Good, the picture should be ready in about ten minutes for pick up," the photographer said to both of them.

"Can we have two copies made?" Sakura asked.

"Sure," the photographer shrugged, "Cost you a little extra, though."

"That's fine," Sakura assured him, and then turning to Sasuke said: "What shall we do for the next ten minutes?"

"There's been an area set up near here for dancing," suggested the photographer, "Most of my clients go there—if you're interested."

"Sure," said Sakura slowly, "We can practice your dancing, Sasuke."

"So you're looking for Uchiha Sasuke, huh?" Ino asked the mysterious—not to mention hot—man, Sai.

The instant she had bumped into Sai, Shikamaru had been driven from her mind with equivalent force. The instant her blue eyes had met his inky ones, she was certain she had died and gone to heaven—but no, she was somehow still alive and not dreaming, and this beautiful specimen of a man was standing before her. He was just as—if not more so—handsome as Sasuke. He was pale, dark haired, broad shouldered, and trim, with a nice set of abs. Ino had become

well-practiced in appreciating the male figure, but this was by far the best sample she had seen since Sasuke. And she was determined not to let this one get away.

"Well, luckily enough for you, Sai-kun, I just happen to know him personally," Ino declared proudly, "Knowing Sasuke, he's with his teammate, Sakura, right now. Which narrows things down quite a bit."

"It does?" the embodiment of a god asked.

"Yep, because Sakura's got bright pink hair, and not many people get to witness that very often," Ino replied, "If we ask around for her, we'll be certain to find Sasuke with her."

"...Ah, I see," Sai said uncertainly as Ino tugged at his arm.

"Of course, I'll come with you," Ino said before Sai could do something like thank her for her help and be on his way again, "so I can introduce you properly."

"Oh," Sai said softly as she marched him in the direction that she had last seen Sasuke and Sakura. She personally couldn't wait to show off what a hot catch she had landed.

Sasuke's hands were rested on Sakura's hips and her arms were around his neck. The two of them were swaying in slow circles in the square to a mellow tune without any words. Sasuke was looking up at the coloured lights above them appreciatively. He had missed his sight and the colours that had come with it—it was nice to see once again. Next time, he vowed, he wouldn't be so careless with his choices, so he wouldn't be forced to resort to something like blinding himself, again.

"What are you thinking?" Sakura asked, looking up at the lanterns too.

"I missed seeing the colours of the world," he replied softly, "And to never be so foolish again."

"In a way," Sakura said slowly, reaching up and tilting his head to look at her, "I'm glad you were so foolish, because if you hadn't taken your sight, you may have been dead now, or worse. Or you would have still been blind to the important things even though you could see."

He touched his forehead to hers affectionately, "I should have never have been blind to begin with. I was stupid, and I know that now. I can only learn from my mistakes and hope that I never do the same again."

He would have never said this to anyone else but Sakura. He knew he was wrong, and it was so painfully obvious he had been, but it was so hard to say it to himself—out loud, harder still. Only to her he could say these things, only to her, whom he trusted in so absolutely.

"Arigatou," he murmured to her, like had done on that night three and a half years ago, "for helping me see again."

She said nothing to that, and he could feel her chakra signature fluttering with different emotions—she was struggling for words she did not have, because there was nothing to say, nothing she could say. He knew it was impossible.

After a few minutes, he felt Yamanaka Ino's signature come within range of the dance area. At first he almost disregarded, knowing that a henpecked Shikamaru was probably going to have to humor Ino in a dance or two, but then he realized that Shikamaru's signature was no where near them, and almost out of detectable range entirely. There was signature that was trailing around in very close proximity to Ino's, right next to her, in fact—this signature was foreign to him. Also, there was something different about this chakra signature, there was no underlying emotion attached to it—there was, but it was suppressed, subdued so that the amount of emotion was

undetectable. Sasuke had never run into this before, and it unnerved him. One strange chakra signature after another.

"Ino's here," Sasuke said, raising his head away from Sakura's forehead, "With someone I don't recognize."

"What? Where?" Sakura asked, her eyes looking around them.

"Behind me," Sasuke murmured, pulling Sakura against him in a close embrace so she could see more easily over his shoulder, "Who's with her?"

"I don't know who he is. I've never seen him before," Sakura said, uncertainly, "Where's Shikamaru?"

"Nowhere near here," Sasuke replied.

"That's so strange..."

"It's none of my business," Sasuke said, closing his eyes and turning on his chakra senses, "but I want to know why her associate is observing me like that."

"The photographer was very helpful," Ino said in a sweet tone to Sai as they walked down the street towards where they had been directed, "It was a nice picture of Sasuke and Sakura, too."

Sai said nothing to this, making this the third failed attempt at making conversation with him. Ino scowled inwardly. Trying to have a conversation with Sai was like trying to have a conversation with Sasuke, which, she added as an afterthought, was almost an impossibility. How on earth was she going to get to know Sai well enough to the point where they could keep in touch after this evening if she didn't know him well enough to ask him for an address where she could locate him?

"Why are you looking for Uchiha Sasuke anyways?" Ino asked curiously, trying again.

Sai didn't answer right away, "I am required to observe him."

Required? Ino didn't ask. She was afraid that she would find out that Sai was an underling of some rival in the Chuunin Exam, or something like that. Maybe her mother was right, her imagination was way too vivid. There was no way that Sai was going to harm Sasuke, right? He seemed too kind of a person.

"I see them!" she said happily, pointing into a group of dancing people.

Sasuke's forehead was touched against Sakura's and they were talking quietly to each other. Ino was suddenly filled with both joy and frustration at the same time. Sakura! How dense could she be? If that wasn't an obvious sign of affection, what was? Silly, silly Sakura and her stupid fear of getting hurt for being too adventurous. Was it only obvious to Ino that Sasuke had feelings for her best friend? She muttered something to herself.

"Did you say something, Ino-san?" Sai asked her, and Ino instantly directed her attention back to him.

"No, nothing at all, Sai-kun," she said flirtatiously, "I'd love to introduce you to both Sasuke and Sakura, though."

"No, that will be unnecessary," he said, his eyes fixed on the couple.

Ino turned her eyes back to them and saw that Sasuke had pulled Sakura into his arms. Sakura saw both Ino and Sai when her head rested on Sasuke's shoulder. Ino waved at her and smiled.

"You're right, Sai-kun," Ino said, nudging him off again, "They do look a little busy at the moment. I would hate to interrupt."

She pushed Sai away from the dancers, "But...I can give you my address and number if you want to talk to them later though."

"Uh..." was all Sai could say in reply as Ino felt that she had confidently trapped him in her web.

"Here you go, missy," the photographer said in his gruff voice as he handed the two copies of the picture to Sakura.

Looking over her shoulder, Sasuke looked curiously down with her at the photo. The two of them were standing comfortably next to each other, Sakura was smiling radiantly as usual, and Sasuke was surprised to see that he didn't look as surly as he thought had. He knew it wasn't a smile on his face—it was a smirk with a touch of softness to it, but it was probably the closest he had come to the real thing since nine and a half years ago. And Sakura looked pleased too, smiling softly at the photo of him.

"Thank you, Sasuke," she muttered quietly, and he felt his features soften a little. For some reason, for which he blamed the unknown emotion, her joy right now, made him feel happy too.

It was close to midnight and the group had gotten back together, and were perched atop a rooftop just outside the festival grounds. The nice thing about being ninja was that you could get away with sitting on people's roofs. Neji and Ten Ten were talking quietly to each other on the edge of the rooftop, while Hinata was pleasantly listening to what Naruto was yammering on about. From what Sakura could gather, the Hyuuga Heiress had fainted again at some point. Meanwhile, Ino had lost her companion from earlier, but seemed pleased enough with herself, though she was refusing to speak to Shikamaru for some reason. Something to do with Temari, Sakura heard—so even though Shikamaru and Ino were sitting next to each other, Ino had put a good meter between them. Shikamaru had given up in trying to apologize, knowing Ino would be mad at him for the next few days.

And then there was Sasuke, looking contentedly up at the sky, the most relaxed expression on his face she had seen in ages. She smiled and squeezed his hand that was in hers. He looked at her, looking mildly surprised by the gesture.

"I know it's a week early, but...Happy New Year," she said, just as the first of the fireworks soared up in the sky, exploding in a colourful glow of white.

A small smirk tugged at the corner of his lips, "Happy New Year."

Above them, the sky rained a million sparkles, mixing with the stars.

A/N: Hate. Big. Group. Scenes. So hard to get everyone to talk. Ugh. Lol, yes. Sai. Originally, I hadn't intended on him coming into *Blind* at all. Not until the sequel. But it's one of those things that happened without me wanting it to happen. The story kinda developed it own mind and ran away with me, and then all of a sudden we have Sai here. Except Naruto hasn't forked him with the Fork of Common Sense, so he's still kind of a blob. A very sexy blob, according to Ino. Still failing at social skills, but not because he's trying to understand bonds—he's going about it like it's tactical exercise or something.

And omg, the anomaly signature! It's back! Le gasp! I told you I wouldn't be touching on it until about now. I still laugh about the number of people who thought it was magical Kisame. Again, not magical Kisame—if he was in Konoha, that'd be rather random. He would have taken a wrong turn on his way to Amegakure, that's for sure. Not to mention that ANBU would freak out. XD I'm not entirely satisfied with the last little bit, but I'm too lazy to fix it. Especially after coming this far, I don't want to have to do any more. (sigh) Ummm, have I finished commenting on all the specialness?I think so. Yeah. Later guys.

Chapter 50

A/N: I think I finally realize why I had so much trouble writing Itachi's character. I was trying to read into something that wasn't there from the beginning, and I didn't have enough info/proof of good Itachi to expand/do anything with it. I was trying to write a fake character like it was his actual personality, which is why I hit a wall. Oh, and fyi, I seem to have lost capability of hating Itachi with a burning passionate hatred. Though I still hold him responsible for Sasuke's current behaviour in the manga. You do not drill something like "hate me, take revenge, do everything you can for power so you can kill me" into the head of an eight year old. Sheesh, he should know better than that.

Chapter Fifty: The First Task The Written Exam

Sasuke was a little apprehensive on the morning of the test. It wasn't because he was nervous for the written portion, nor was it because he felt he would do poorly on the parts afterwards. In fact, he was very confident about how he would do on the Exam, even more so than he had been when he had taken it the first time—and he had been almost overconfident back then. What made him apprehensive was that he could sense the strange anomalous signature very well. What made it worse was the closer he, Sakura, Naruto, and Kakashi drew to the Academy, where the written portion was held, the ridiculously powerful chakra signature drew closer. What's more, the closer they got, the more Sasuke began to realize that the anomaly signature was in the Academy already.

He did not fear the signature, but it made him uneasy—he didn't know what it meant. Naruto's chakra own strange chakra came from the nine-tailed fox demon within him, Sakura said, but it was always undetectable until it was tapped into. This signature was not compressed in such a manner, and Sasuke didn't know how to

interpret that. He hadn't said anything about detecting the signature to Sakura, he knew that she would get worried if he continuously mentioned it—it made him sound unhesitant, almost worried, which would concern her. She had done more than her fair share of worrying already the past couple months.

When they finally arrived out front of the room where all the other participants were, there were only a few left trickling in, and the group that was Team Seven stopped. They had all come to see him off and wish him luck. Sasuke felt a rush of gratitude towards them as they all imparted their statements of confidence in him.

"I can't say this for sure, but it seems the 'don't cheat' thing has been pretty standard here in Konoha," Sakura was saying, "But I don't know—I heard that from Konohamaru, and he's about as reliable as Naruto."

"I hope you came up with a good way to cheat, teme!" Naruto exclaimed enthusiastically, and then Sakura's insult seemed to register, "Hey!"

"Are you sure it's okay to be telling him so loudly to cheat?" Kakashi asked, tucking his book out of sight, "Anyway, I guess I should say something too, being the teacher and all... Don't fail, for one."

Sasuke raised his eyebrow at his sensei.

"You'll do well, you've trained hard for this," Kakashi said more seriously, "I can't remember the last time I had a student single-handedly beat me. Sakura and Naruto managed it together, but..."

"Wait... Sasuke beat you on his *own* ?!" Naruto exclaimed, pointing a disbelieving finger in the Uchiha's direction.

"That he did, Naruto," Kakashi replied, patting Naruto on the head, a patient expression on his face, "Many times."

"Are you being serious, now, Kakashi-sensei?" Sakura had a skeptical expression on her face, "Because when you use that tone of voice, it's hard to tell."

"I'm perfectly serious, Sakura, or are you doubting Sasuke's ability?" he replied, raising an eyebrow at her.

She looked startled at being accused of such a thing, "Of course not."

"Teme..." Naruto glared at Sasuke, "I've got my eye on you! Don't think I'm going to let you get stronger than me, you hear?"

"Wait until after the exam before you attack him, Naruto," Kakashi said patiently, "Anyways, I think we'd better let Sasuke go. We don't want him to almost get disqualified because he was late—just like last time."

"That was your fault," Sasuke said indignantly.

"Anyways, good luck!" Kakashi said smiling under his mask, and then affixed him with a serious look, "One last thing—just because you beat me on your own, doesn't mean that should be the only way to do it."

"I know," Sasuke replied; Kakashi gave a nod and the disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

"Whatever happens, you're still strong," Sakura said, coming up to him and putting her arms around him in a light hug, "You could be genin until you're forty-five, and it wouldn't matter to me."

"Haha, that would suck if Sasuke ended up being a genin until he was forty-five," Naruto laughed, but then his face changed as he looked at Sasuke, a sincere grin on his face, "Do your best, teme!"

Sasuke found an affectionate smirk forming on his lips, "Hn."

"That's 'yes' in Sasuke language," Sakura said, letting go of him and then pushing on Naruto's shoulder, "We shouldn't hold him up any longer. We'll come back when the written part is over, okay?"

He gave a nod as Naruto waved, and then turned towards the classroom door, preparing himself for what lay in wait for him.

Sasuke entered the exam room with a group of shinobi from Suna, and peered around the room. Everyone was moving around the room, looking for their place names for the test, and even though he could sense the strange signature wandering around, he couldn't get a good look. He would wait until they were seated before looking at the person.

He was older than the majority of the people there; most of them were hopeful genin taking the exam for the first time. Others, like him were taking the exam for their second or third time. There looked to be a few around his age though, and a couple who looked older. There was also one person who looked frighteningly like the girl, Karin, from Otogakure—could have been her cousin, the resemblance was that startling.

A few eyes turned towards the door as he and the Suna shinobi entered, but they flicked away again disinterestedly. Nobody noticed or paid attention to the scratch mark on his headband, which suited him just fine. He knew already that he would eventually attract attention to himself because he was an Uchiha, but he wanted to avoid anything additional if possible.

He quickly found his seat which was positioned middle front of the room—a couple rows back. Sitting down, he looked at his test papers in front of him, neatly laid out, pencils lined up. Taking one, he scrawled his name in the corner of the page and then waited for the others to assume their seats. He folded his fingers beneath his nose and closed his eyes. He followed Naruto and Sakura's signatures out of the building and down the road outside, and then

once they were a moderate distance away, lost interest and turned his attention elsewhere.

The room was now settled, and relatively silent, and Sasuke took the opportunity to examine the owner of the signature—he activated his senses and focused in the direction of the owner, who was sitting towards the back of the room. Unfortunately, because of this, there were many people between them and him, and one of which happened to be a rather tall and wide genin—who looked no older than fourteen—was sitting right behind him. This rather effectively blocked his view.

It was then that the form of a familiar looking man wandered to the front of the room while rows of Chuunin filled in the sides of the room. Sasuke recognized instantly the setup of the 'no-cheating' test—it looked like Sakura had heard correctly.

"Alright everyone, listen up!" boomed the voice of Morino Ibiki, "My name is Morino Ibiki and I'll be your proctor for this part of the exam!"

Morino Ibiki was still the same as Sasuke remembered. With small narrowed eyes and a set jaw, he still looked as gruff and as intimidating as he did three and a half years ago. Though one of his scars didn't show with Sasuke's chakra senses; the other was a deep chasm across his face and was visible to him. The other that he knew was there, was just a ribbon of scar tissue and couldn't be seen. Missing one scar changed his look almost entirely, Sasuke pondered.

"Uchiha, pay attention please!" barked Morino, and Sasuke was startled at being addressed.

He deactivated his senses and opened his eyes, remembering that to others it looked like he was dozing off.

"I was," he replied, straightening up, as whispers erupted throughout the room, "I apologize if it did not appear that way, Proctor."

Morino held his gaze for a moment, and Sasuke wondered if it was meant to be a warning look. He did not look away though; Morino broke the gaze to give a thundering bark that silenced the room instantly.

"Alright, here are the rules: Before you lie your written tests. Each test contains nine questions, which you must answer before time is up. You will be given an hour and a half to write each test and after that, you will be undergoing personal interviews before myself and four Jounin," Morino told them, turning around and writing on the chalkboard.

Sasuke frowned slightly—interviews? That was definitely different than last time, but he didn't think he had anything to worry about anyways. He would be forthright and succinct, a combination that of late hadn't failed him. He would have to answer his questions carefully.

"Each of you will be called in individually to answer the questions we will ask you, and we shall evaluate you and give you your results before you go," the man continued, "As for the written portion—*cheating is not tolerated* . That is what the men and women at the side of the room are for. They are all chuunin who are reputed for excellent eyesight and will be watching you throughout the written portion. They will be monitoring you for possible cheating—yes, there are some of you who will try. You will know when you've been caught. If you are caught cheating, you are to leave the exam room and you will not be permitted to participate in the Chuunin Exam again."

The rules were the same, Sasuke noted, except they had made the prospect of cheating much more frightening, and had elevated the penalty for being caught, and you could only be caught once. Of course he knew that cheating was required to pass the written part, and it sounded like the infamous Tenth Question would be out of the equation entirely, as he had mentioned no point systems for getting the questions on the exam wrong.

"The papers you are about to write will be graded on your accuracy of answering the questions correctly, anyone who gets below eight-five percent will not be permitted to continue onto the next portion of the test," Morino Ibiki added sweeping the room with his intimidating gaze, "Are there any questions?"

There was dead silence in the room.

"You may begin."

"So what're we going to do while we wait?" Naruto asked, putting his hands behind his head, looking at the sky in a partially disinterested manner, "The exam's supposed to take about three hours."

"I know already," Sakura replied, walking down the street, looking for possible options of a pastime, "And it makes me wonder—how did you manage to get through it? Twice, not to mention. You can sit still about as long as a squirrel can."

"That's not nice, Sakura-chan," Naruto said making a mock pouting face, "And I'll have you know that squirrels are deep and meditative creatures."

Sakura laughed, "A squirrel that was a monk in the making? And since when have I ever been truly nice to you?"

He made a face at her, and she only laughed again. "If there's ever been a meditative squirrel, it'd only belong to Hinata," she went on, "She's such a quiet girl with a gentleness that rubs off on other people."

Naruto smiled then and nodded sharply in agreement, "She always watched my back, even if I didn't know she was there. I'm glad that I finally slowed down enough to look behind me—I think I would have lost purpose in pushing forward if I had never known she was behind me all the way."

"Not to mention she'd exhaust herself trying to keep up," Sakura added, and she had to avoid a playful nudge in the ribs.

Suddenly, Naruto looked up at the end of the street, something having caught his attention, "Anosa...Sakura-chan, isn't that Kanaye coming down the street towards us?"

She turned her head and looked, and sure enough, her brother could be seen dodging and zipping between people out doing their morning shopping. He was looking excited overjoyed and then at intervals, where somebody blocked his way, frustrated. It was as he got closer that he started waving at the two of them, but then he started shouting her name.

"Sakura! Sakura!!" he yelled, getting frustrated with a slow moving elderly couple, he leapt over them by applying chakra to his feet. He landed neatly in front of them.

"What's with you at this time of day? Normally you'd be at home, sleep—" Sakura started, but Kanaye interrupted her.

"They found Dad!" Kanaye blurted out, a wide grin on his face, his expression the definition of happiness, "They've got him at the hospital right now! He's completely okay!"

Sakura stood for a moment, her mind frozen by the words, and then slowly, they sunk in. They had found their father, he was home, and he was here, in Konoha. She applied chakra to her feet faster than she could remember directing it before in her life, and in an instant, she was flying across the rooftops towards the hospital, tears smarting in her eyes. She knew Kanaye was in her wake, but she wasn't really paying attention. Her father was alive, and that was all that mattered. She had to tell him everything that she had meant to say but had never said it. She would make sure she would tell her father she loved him, because the next time, fortune may not be smiling on her with a third chance.

To pass the written portion was simple, Sasuke noted. Last time there had been two Chuunin mingled in with the students who had the answers already. The test was to get the information from them by cheating without getting caught, but they would be graded on how accurate they copied the information. It was simple enough—Sasuke needed to find the Chuunin among them, and copy from them, or from someone close to them.

Closing his eyes, he began scouting out the different signatures in the room—chakra was something that grew gradually with time and experience. Those who had used and implemented their chakra had larger signatures than those who were less experienced—there were a couple exceptions though, like Naruto's Kyuubi, and those born with larger amounts of chakra than others. However, in a room full of genin, it shouldn't be too hard to find the Chuunin among the rest, if he could disregard the distraction that was the darned signature in the back of the room.

A sea of life was around him, the moods flickering and changing—some people were so nervous that it showed in their signatures. Some were more practiced than others, some were almost so weak they were nearly like normal non-shinobi and there was the irritatingly abnormal signature at the back of the room which was hard to ignore. But despite this, it didn't take him more than five minutes to pick out both Chuunin. One was seated towards the back of the room, on his right side, while the other was seated in the exact middle of the row in front of him, one person to his right.

With his eyes closed he could not easily be accused of cheating, because they would have no evidence, so all he needed to do was hope that Chuunin, whose paper was so clearly within his sight, pressed hard on the paper when he wrote. The room was silent—nobody had started writing yet. Everyone was clearly puzzled by the difficulty of the questions. After about two or three more minutes of absolute silence—only broken by the occasional shuffle of paper, cough, or creak of a chair—Sasuke heard someone begin to write in the direction of the Chuunin who was farthest from him. His hearing

was still sharp, he noted with satisfaction. Then, a few moments later the Chuunin near him began to write as well.

Sasuke opened his eyes only to make a deep groove under each question, so that he could see where he should write, even with his eyes closed, and then closing his eyes once more, he watched the Chuunin carefully. As the Chuunin wrote down the answer to the first question, his hand blocked the way, but as he moved on to the second one, Sasuke smirked quietly to himself. The Chuunin indeed pressed hard while he wrote—hard enough at least, as his answers were left as clear indentations. The rest was simple.

Sakura burst into her father's hospital room, huffing and puffing, having run the entire way from the Academy district. She leaned against the door for support as she beamed a bright smile at her father sitting lying on the hospital bed, her mother sitting on a chair next to him, both of them looking up at her in surprise. She opened her mouth to say something when Kanaye crashed into her from behind, and then Naruto crashing into him. The three of them fell to the floor in a heap.

"Ack!" Naruto squawked as they all fell.

"Hey!" Sakura remarked indignantly to Kanaye as she pushed herself up from the floor.

"Not my fault, it was you who stopped so suddenly," Kanaye retorted.

"You haven't even seen your father for more than ten seconds and you're already fighting?" came the voice of their mother.

Sakura scrambled to her feet, completely forgetting Kanaye, and dashed to her father's side, throwing her arms around him.

"It's a cornucopia of love!" Kanaye declared, embracing both her and their father, "Mom, Naruto, join in!"

Naruto squeezed in on the other side of Sakura and with a musical laugh, their mother joined in too. Sakura could hear a deep chuckle in her father's chest and she smiled happily, tears moistening her eyes. A few seconds later, there was a gruff 'alright, alright, everyone off' and they all detangled themselves. Sakura wiped her eyes and looked at her father, who put a hand on her head affectionately.

"Hey," he said with a grin on his face.

"Hi," she replied with a smile and then tried to fight back tears when she continued, "Don't scare us like that again, okay, Dad? We almost gave up hope."

"Where were you? What happened, Dad?" Kanaye asked desperately, plopping down on a chair on the other side of the bed.

"Your father was about to start telling me when the three of you fell in the door," her mother said, "Start over from the beginning, dear."

"Alright, so it all started right after we made it out of the prison area. We had nearly made it out of the complex when we took a wrong turn and found ourselves in a room of what were obviously subordinates," he started, "The problem was that there was a red-cloud clad member in there too. Things kinda went downhill after that."

Sakura listened intently as their father recounted his story of how he and the team made their desperate escape with a sickly and weak Jiraiya, and how he had gotten separated while trying to throw a persistent pursuer from their trail. And how despite his efforts to rejoin the group, he couldn't find them and was eventually captured. He recounted each episode with detail and explained the situation, and Sakura knew that it couldn't have been prevented at all. But when her father's story came to his time captured, and questioned, the details were smudged away and hazy images came to mind. He had most likely been tortured, though he didn't say it directly. He continued on, telling of his detainment and his encounter with Uchiha

Itachi and a young girl named Nariko, whom he discovered was host to the six-tailed weasel demon.

Detail resumed it's normal level as he explained how he managed to convince the innocent Nariko of her true fate in Akatsuki, and how she had come, hurt and betrayed, to free him. Despite his insisting, she refused to come with him, and he was forced to leave her behind as his window of escape slowly began to close. At this point, Naruto frowned and demanded why he had not brought her with him, where she would live a full life. A small argument ensued, which Sakura's mother had to break up, by saying what was done was done, and she hoped that kindly Nariko would find her own way out of Akatsuki's cruel clutches.

Moving on, Sakura's father continued to tell them of how, despite his escape, he had a difficult time hiding from those who were sent after him to find him. And it was a good couple of days before things quieted down enough for him to leave the little crevasse he had been sheltering in. After that, he left as quickly as he could, on what little energy and chakra he had left. The room that they had detained him in had made sleeping and resting very difficult, and the confinements placed on him had made his chakra sluggish and useless. It was only after he was out that his chakra could be implemented again, and even then, it took a week before he could use it properly.

He made for the nearest town and was taken in by an elderly couple who had need of an able bodied man who would be willing to assist them with their fall harvest. Still not trusting that Akatsuki would have passed him off as long gone so soon, he hid away his headband and took the job. He stayed with the elderly couple for a couple months and was fed and was cared for in exchange for the labour he contributed. Any injuries he had received were healed and once the harvest was over, he bid the kind couple farewell and headed home.

"It took me about a week to get here at top speed—getting up early, retiring late in the evening," he said, lying back on the pillows of the hospital bed, "And as soon as I walk through the front gate, they

swoop down on me and throw me in here. I keep telling them I'm perfectly fine, almost better than when I left, but they won't listen."

"It's just to be certain, Dad," Sakura said, "They just want to be completely sure nothing's wrong with you. Make sure there's no residual jutsu on you, memory modifications, loyalty manipulations..."

"...lasting effects from the old woman poisoning your food," Kanaye picked up where she trailed off, and their father gave him a 'don't talk like that' look, "Hey! It's a possibility. She might not have even done it on purpose—she could have been a really bad cook."

"In any case, it sounds like you've been through a lot, and I'm guessing you arrived after traveling all morning," Sakura's mother said, standing up, "We'll let you rest, and let the nurses finish their check-ups so you can go home."

She gave him a quick peck before grabbing her bag, a hand resting affectionately on her husband's shoulder. Sakura gave her dad one last hug before standing next to Naruto who was waiting by the door.

"Don't go missing ever again, okay?" she said with a sad smile. She was serious, but she didn't want to worry him either.

"I'll try not to," he said with a grin, before she and Naruto exited the room, leaving Kanaye and her mother in the room.

Out in the hall, she looked at Naruto, who was staring at the ground with a dark look on his face. Tilting her head slightly, she felt concern mar her brow. Normally her father and Naruto got along well together, but the discussion of the host of the six-tailed weasel had him upset. She knew that Naruto felt an innate need to help any others who were like him, and it had already torn him that he couldn't help whoever Uchiha Itachi and the other blue-hued man were after. And now there was someone else who was doomed to die.

"I'm sorry, Naruto," she said quietly, "that he couldn't save the poor girl who helped him."

"He should have knocked her out and brought her anyways," he replied almost bitterly, "That's what I would have done."

Sakura didn't say anything—there was no arguing that. The girl could have slowed her father down, or made it easier for them to find the both of them, or traveling would be much slower. But she knew none of these reasons would make it justifiable in Naruto's eyes, because he would have done it despite all those things. She knew it was selfish, but she was just glad her father was home, safe, sound, and alive, with or without the Nariko girl.

"Alright, your time is up!" Morino Ibiki thundered, making most of the genin in the room jump—Sasuke was one of those few people who hadn't jumped at all.

The whole room was a little jumpy and nervous—the first person who had been caught cheating was a girl about four rows back and she had screamed when the kunai embedded itself into her test paper. After that, the mood in the room had been tense, on edge, everyone was nervous—except Sasuke. He had finished his test paper after copying down what the Chuunin had written—who was pretending to check his answers—and turned over his paper, and he could tell by how tense the people next to him had gotten, that they were frustrated that they could no longer cheat off him.

He had folded his arms and rested his head on them, pretending to sleep while he was analyzing different techniques others had been using to cheat. There were some quite obvious cheaters who had been bumped off rather quickly—they mostly consisted of people who lacked creative thought and were neck-craning. Others were using subtle jutsu to obtain their answers, and soon rather than nervous chakra signatures, Sasuke sensed chakra molding and flicking about the room.

The number of people slowly diminished, and about half the people were thrown out before the time was up. The powerful chakra signature at the back of the room was one of those who had remained in the room, and Sasuke noticed that the powerful chakra was never once used during the exam. As the number of the people in the room lessened, the tension and anxiety seemed to rise in exponential intervals among those who had taken the test the first time. It was quite irritating, and Sasuke was rather relieved by the booming announcement that the test was over.

"Hand pass your papers to the Chuunin on the right side of you, the Chuunin on the left will be monitoring you to make sure that you don't try and copy from the papers as they go by you," Morino said, crossing his arms.

There was the shuffling of paper as everyone handed their papers down. By this point, most people were too unnerved to cheat, so no one else was exterminated from the exam room. Sasuke passed his paper and the rest to the right and then folded his fingers under his nose, studying Morino tentatively. Now it was time for the interviews.

"We'll be calling your name in alphabetical order," Morino Ibiki declared as he took the thick stack of exam papers from one of the Chuunin, "Aburame Himawari. Please enter the room."

Sasuke knew that his last name would be one of the first be called, after the 'a' came the 'i' and then came the 'u', which would be him. The only way he would probably be able to find out who had the anomaly signature would be if he or she had a last name that started with 'a' or 'i'. But as the names were called, he realized that the person probably wouldn't be called before him, and he wouldn't get to see them on his way out, because nobody had come out of the room yet. There must be another exit in the room.

"Uchiha Sasuke," a Chuunin called from the door.

Sasuke rose from his seat and shuffled along the row until he reached the end. There were vast amounts of whispering now, and

he felt irritation creep over him. Some people probably knew that he had left the village and were surprised he was back, others were probably just awed at being in the presence of an Uchiha. Tch. Either way, it was annoying.

He walked over to the door, and before he walked in, he cast a final glare into the room, which silenced everyone. He turned away and allowed himself a small smirk—Morino Ibiki could silence the room with this voice, but he could silence it with just one look. And with confidence building inside him he walked through the door.

A/N: Yes, I know it's short. Only came out to be Eleven pages on Microsoft Word, but, guess what? The last chapter was twenty-seven, so I think I have the right to a short chapter. Next one will be longer, I promise. There's a reason I cut this one off here, so yeah...

Anyways, the Cornucopia of Love © Neil Ciceriga, creator of Potter Puppet Pals. And I think that's it. Yeah. See you in two weeks.

Chapter 51

A/N: God bless my editor for helping me with this. I cannot tell you how long I agonized over it.

Chapter Fifty-One: Teammates

Sasuke crept through the dark tunnels, slipping easily from shadow to shadow like it was something he did every day. With his occupation, he did, in a sense. He was almost there, he was so close to his destination, and so far, everything had been going well. He monitored the area for chakra signatures, but there weren't any close enough to him; he was alone at the moment, Naruto and Sakura's signatures slipping out of range a while ago. They had stayed behind to guard the entrance to this inner chamber of the Waterfall Feudal Lord's mansion to increase their chances of completing the mission.

It had been about four months since Sasuke had passed the Chuunin Exam, and he had gone on numerous missions with Naruto and Sakura, and sometimes even Kakashi. However, he still needed a few hours to completely negate his sentence for betraying Konoha, and that was why he was endeavoring so hard on this mission. He had been promised that whatever number of hours it took him and the team to complete this mission, twice that amount would be taken off his sentence, because this mission was so important. It was also the first A-ranked mission he'd ever been sent on as a chuunin.

He was attached to the ceiling at the moment, to avoid being spotted (even though there was nobody nearby) and to avoid any unexpected traps. The map Sakura had showed to him was etched into his mind as he crawled along the ceilings; he was getting closer to the inner antechamber of the palace that was his goal.

Landing nimbly down outside the door, he pushed it open slowly, checking for traps, but encountering none. For such a priceless relic, its wards were getting poorer and poorer the closer he got to it. If anything, Naruto and Sakura were handling the most difficult part, and he should hurry so he could return and help them.

Slipping into the room, he looked around at the countless weapons amassed there. The antechamber, Sakura had said, was currently a weapons' storage, and the Feudal Lord had a vast collection. The weapon Sasuke was looking for was one that was stolen from the Fire Country's Feudal Lord, and was extremely valuable and dangerous. Sasuke spotted a thick scroll lying on a table that was probably the index of all the weapons in the room. Stealing across the floor to where it was, Sasuke unfurled it and scanned the writing quickly. The weapon Sasuke was looking for was a recent acquisition, and it was written towards the top of the list, making it quick to find, and after reading the location in the antechamber, he hurried quickly to retrieve it.

It was as he was crossing the floor to an alcove off the main room that the lights suddenly went out without warning. Instantly he activated his senses and frowned. There had been no chakra in the lights, so why had they suddenly extinguished with no outward assistance? There was no breeze, and nobody nearby. He didn't think that he'd activated a trap, because nothing further attacked him. He got the distinct feeling something was off.

After standing in the dark for a moment, in which nothing further happened, he decided to take his chances and keep going. The dark wasn't a problem for him anyways, and Naruto and Sakura could only keep the entrance guarded for so long before reinforcements came. He was wasting time at the moment. Using only his senses, he picked his way easily across the room and towards the alcove without difficulty.

A frown passed over the red-painted lips of a dark haired woman, her beautiful features blemished by the frown her dark eyebrows

were making. She was sitting at a table with two people sitting on either side of her. The five of them had their hands linked in a row, and a connection of chakra from the beautiful woman linked them. Sitting on her left were two men, sitting on her right, was a man and woman. The closest man on her right opened his eyes and looked at her.

"What's wrong?"

"He sensed something off," the ruby-lipped woman replied, "And is maneuvering using some technique I've never seen."

"Are you sure? I thought the parameters were infallible," came a gruff voice from the larger of the two men on her left.

"They are; this is an ability he has in his inventory, or the parameters would not allow it, even if he realized he was caught," she replied, "This is the first time that this has happened. He doesn't know he's caught, but it's the first time a subject has noticed something wrong."

"Keep holding him still, do not let him go; we shall see the outcome," came the voice of the other woman, "His teammates?"

"They will be brought before him shortly," the first woman replied.

"Good, carry on," instructed the gruff-voiced man.

Sasuke worked his lock-picking tools quickly in the dark, and soon the cabinet that held the weapon was open. Inside lay an oddly crafted knife—it had two separate blades, which made it look like an oversized fork. It also looked like it was useless for any practical use. However, Sasuke could sense the massive amount of chakra within it the instant his hand touched it; there was no doubt that this was the weapon he sought. He quickly snatched it out of its container and locked it once again—to confuse his enemies further. He didn't know why this weapon was so important, but it must be if they were going to send a team into a heavily fortified castle to retrieve it.

He hurried out of the room again and back down the halls he came. But the further he went the more wary he became. The clamor had calmed down, and Naruto and Sakura's signatures were not moving. A frown passed over his face as he observed two additional signatures present with his teammates, and judging by how close in proximity they were to each other, he knew there was something amiss. He stopped a hundred meters from the room—the outer antechamber he remembered—and pondered the situation. Taking to the ceiling he crept along the ornate decorations and lanterns until he at last reached the door.

Again, a frown passed over the woman's face, "He knows we have them. He knows he's coming up to something."

"How? We can all see him, but only you know when he brushes the parameters. How does he know?" asked the gruff voice.

"I don't know."

"Continue, we have to let this pass, no matter if he senses something off. We will hold him. Nobody has ever broken past the parameters—things should work out just fine."

Sasuke positioned himself on the wall around the doorframe like a gecko and slowly peered in through the open doorway. The two guards held knives to Naruto and Sakura's throats; and the pressure was evident. With his senses—which he still hadn't deactivated—he could see blood beading at the edge. Naruto's face was angry and frustrated, while Sakura's was serious and ashen. How had they been captured? As he was deciding how he should deal with this situation, one of the guards called out to him.

"We know you're there! Reveal yourself!"

Sasuke hesitated; he had been silent, even to his own ears—how could they know? He tried to get a better vantage point.

"Come out, I said!"

"He's not there," Naruto said, irritated, "Sasuke's better than that."

"Shut up you," snapped the second guard, "He's there... I know he's watching us right now..."

The guard's eyes pupils were invisible to him, but like when he was blind, he could tell when he was being watched. He knew that the man's eyes were resting on his position, even if he couldn't see him. Sasuke didn't know what to do now—somehow he'd been found out.

"Come out now, or we'll kill the loudmouthed one!" shouted the first guard.

"Hey!"

Sasuke opened his eyes then, deactivating his senses; inwardly he scowled as he dropped down, "I commend you for sensing me, though I must admit, I don't know how you did it."

"That's not for you to know," the same guard snapped darkly, "You have something that belongs to the Feudal Lord, and if you do not return it to us, we will kill your teammates."

"Don't listen to them, Sasuke," Sakura said instantly, "The mission must be completed! They were counting on us! Their defenses were mostly taken out before we were captured, if you leave us, you'll definitely be able to complete the mission!"

"Quiet, bitch!" the second guard snapped, before turning to Sasuke, "Move one foot forwards and we'll slit their throats."

"Teme, don't listen to them! Sakura-chan and I worked so hard to get the way clear for you, so you'd better not let that go to waste! We knew we'd get caught, but we hoped we'd at least be able to make it so you could go!" the guard tried to cover Naruto's mouth at this point, but Naruto bit into his hand hard and continued like nothing

had happened as the guard nursed his hand, "If you don't go, teme, I'll never forgive you, even in the afterlife! Now go before more of those bastards come!"

"They're just going to kill us all anyways, if you hand it over!" Sakura yelled pleadingly, "If you go, at least something will be accomplished."

"Are you really going to let your teammates die?" the first guard sneered, "If you give us the weapon, we'll let you all go. We'll escort you off the property and all of you will be left unharmed. Granted you cooperate."

Sasuke didn't move for a second, he was sensing and thinking. He weighed his options carefully—he couldn't sense anyone's chakra signatures nearby, which in itself was odd, but a good thing. It would only last so long—but there was no way in any level of hell that he would let Naruto and Sakura die. The bargain for their lives was an obvious lie, but it upped his chances.

"Do you promise that they will be left unharmed?" Sasuke asked warily.

"Sasuke!"

"Teme!"

"Yes, I swear," the first guard replied over the cries of protest coming from their hostages.

"I'm getting the weapon out," Sasuke said in a careful voice while removing his backpack slowly off his back.

He slowly unzipped it and reached inside, keeping his eyes on the guards while they watched him with equal wariness. Sasuke's hand brushed the hilt of the weapon, and he felt the chakra in it, but only for that brief instant he brushed it. Not removing his eyes from the guards, he grabbed two throwing needles deeper in.

"I'm removing the weapon," he said withdrawing his hand slowly.

Just before his hand passed the lip of the backpack, he suddenly moved with his infamous speed, flicking his wrist precisely, charging the needles with chidori. A split second later, both guards fell away from Sakura and Naruto, a throwing needle each between their eyes, embedded deeply.

Naruto blew a long whistle, "For a moment I thought you'd actually give it up."

"Sasuke, why didn't you do as we said?" Sakura asked, throwing her arms around him in relief.

"You think that I would let you guys die for an impractical knife?" Sasuke asked raising his eyebrows at her.

"...No, but..." Sakura started.

"I'm glad you know that," Sasuke said pointedly, and Sakura looked a little guilty.

"I...I... Thank you," Sakura said, tears springing up in her eyes.

"There, that's it, isn't it?" said the voice of the second woman present.

"No, it's not," argued the first with another frown.

"Don't frown so much, you'll get wrinkles on your beautiful face," said the younger of the two men next to her.

"Why ever not?" asked the second woman, ignoring the comment.

"Because he never relinquished the weapon," said the gruff voice, "He must either sacrifice his friends or relinquish the weapon. He did neither."

"We need to force him to give it up, or he must lose his friends," clarified the ruby-lipped woman, "As it is now, we have gotten nowhere."

"We need something more drastic," said the gruff-voiced man.

"Is that wise?" asked the younger man.

"I'll send someone stronger; something that'll force him to make a choice," said the ruby-lipped woman.

"Be careful," warned the voice of the third man who had not yet spoken, "He sensed something off again, didn't he?"

A pause, "I'll be careful."

Sasuke let go of Sakura, and smirked at Naruto in a pleased manner. Things had turned out exactly how he planned. *Still* nobody was headed their direction though, and again he felt like something was not quite right. But both Sakura and Naruto were alive and they still had the knife. They needed to leave while there was still that opening they had created.

"We need to hurry," Sasuke said, looking at the far door across the room, "We're still clear, but only for so long."

"Who made you team leader, teme?" Naruto complained jokingly, but they started off at a light jog across the room.

They had barely gone anywhere though, when a voice from behind called them to a halt, "This is as far as you go."

Sasuke froze, for more reasons than one. One reason was that there were no chakra signatures in the area, yet, there was someone behind them. The more startling of the two reasons was that he recognized that voice, all too well.

The room of five broke into a clamor.

"You call that careful?" exclaimed the third man.

"I didn't mean for it to happen! Something's wrong," said the ruby-lipped woman, looking panicked, "I can't control the scenario anymore."

"What?" demanded the voice of the second man, "What does that mean?"

"Whether he realizes it or not, Uchiha Sasuke has just gained control," replied the woman.

"Well, what does *that* mean?" asked the second woman.

"Two things: that there is very little I can do to regain control, and that Uchiha Sasuke is a lot stronger than any of us initially realized."

Sasuke didn't need to see the look of shock on Sakura's face nor the look of anger on Naruto's to know who it was. He whirled around slowly, for once in a long while feeling anxious instead of thrilled upon facing this person. He looked into the red eyes evenly.

"You."

Itachi blinked slowly, "Hand over the weapon, Sasuke, or I *will* kill your friends."

"Get out of here," he told Naruto and Sakura, "Take the weapon and go."

"I'm afraid I can't allow that," Itachi's eyes flickered to Sakura and instinctively Sasuke stepped between her and his brother, shielding her from him.

Sasuke was thinking hard. There were so many things wrong with this. The intel said that the premises did not have doings with

Akatsuki, nor had there been reports of Akatsuki activity in the area. The weapon, while valuable, did not seem to be something Akatsuki would be interested in, and then there was the matter of the still missing guards. But the biggest factor of all was that even though Sasuke could see Itachi, hear Itachi, his brother was lacking a chakra signature. By all rights, Itachi shouldn't be there in front of him. Even Bunshin had a small amount of chakra, so there was no way that Itachi wouldn't have a signature if he were there.

Unless he wasn't actually there.

What if it was a genjutsu? It was a pretty poor one if it was, as they had made a very obvious seam.

"Standing in front of her won't keep me from killing her," Itachi said coolly, "She'll be the first to die if you don't hand over the weapon."

"You won't kill her," Sasuke said quietly, "You can't kill her. Not simply because I won't let you, but because you're not real."

Naruto's voice came in anxiously, "Teme...?"

"Sasuke, what...?" Sakura's voice also was concerned.

Itachi narrowed his eyes.

"You're not here. You're not real. This is a genjutsu," Sasuke breathed, his heart racing, hoping he was right—it was the only explanation, "Kai."

"Sasuke, what are you trying to do?" Sakura asked, alarmed.

But Sasuke didn't listen, "Kai!"

"Teme—"

"KAI!" Sasuke roared and he felt his chakra surge around him, cleaning the chakra network in him.

Itachi started to fade, and then slowly, everything else followed. The world around him melted away into blackness, the blackness behind his own eyelids. He was lying on a cold floor, he could feel, his eyes closed. All was silent for a moment.

There were five signatures in the room with him, and at least two-dozen nearby. *'Enemies,'* he thought wildly.

Leaping to his feet from his position on the ground (a great feat for anyone), he activated his senses reflexively and took a fighting stance, raising a fist to protect his face and one to protect his kidneys. But no attacks came; there was no movement. All he saw before him was five open mouths. In front of him, all holding hands, sat—from left to right—Anko, Sarutobi Asuma, Yuuhi Kurenai, Morino Ibiki, and the third proctor, Genma.

"He broke out of it," Anko breathed.

"That isn't supposed to be possible," said Genma, his toothpick falling from his mouth.

Yuuhi Kurenai seemed to be the first to recover, as she dropped the hands of the people next to her, and slowly started clapping. Soon, the rest of the table joined in. Sasuke, utterly bewildered, extinguished his senses and opened his eyes.

"What's going on?" he asked, but already pieces were beginning to fall into place.

"Congratulations, Uchiha. I suppose we should have expected no less from you," Morino Ibiki said, looking impressed—coming from Morino, that was saying something.

"You look confused, Uchiha," Anko said smiling.

"I have no idea what's going on—why am I in Konoha? No, don't answer that. It's obvious I never left, but why was a genjutsu placed on me here?" he asked, relaxing his stance slightly.

"The interview part of the exam is non-existent," Morino said gruffly, "Every now and again we will drag out this method of separating those who pass from those who fail."

"The door has a lacing of chakra that doesn't activate until someone passes through it, making it impossible to detect until you're already caught in the genjutsu it activates. Nobody as of yet has ever realized they're in a genjutsu," Yuuhi Kurenai started, closing her eyes, "It is a complex genjutsu that uses a person's own knowledge to create a scenario that is manipulated by the caster to affect what the victim perceives as true. The objective of my genjutsu is to use the scenario to create a moral dilemma. To choose your teammates or the mission you thought you were on."

"When we link our hands together, we are all able to see the genjutsu, and we can judge whether you pass or fail the test based on your choice," Anko threw in, "But Kurenai is the only one who can affect it."

"But because you had abilities beyond what we'd anticipated, one of which I still don't know what it is, you brushed the parameters of the genjutsu multiple times and did what was not supposed to happen—save both the item and the hostages," Kurenai said, opening her crimson eyes again, sounding impressed, "When I tried to recreate a similar scenario, but instead using one of your deepest fears from your own mind, I inadvertently gave you control over the situation. When you pulled Uchiha Itachi from the darkest corners of your mind, it created a paradox in the genjutsu. You realized what was going on, and then, amazingly, broke out."

Sasuke said nothing to this. He was still sorting out his thoughts. He was having a little difficulty accepting that months hadn't passed, but he was relieved that he wasn't losing his sanity and seeing people without chakra signatures. It meant that Naruto and Sakura were still safe, and that Itachi was nowhere near. But he didn't like the fact that now the five people in front of him knew that one of his deepest fears was Itachi. He didn't like the fact that he now knew Itachi was

someone he feared. He wanted to deny fearing his brother, but if this genjutsu wasn't proof of that... He clenched his jaw a little.

"What you did was supposed to be impossible," Sarutobi Asuma said, "Kurenai developed this technique on her own, and has never taught it to anyone. Not to mention that she's our best genjutsu user—and you bested her."

"There's still one issue left here," said Morino gruffly, "You never answered the moral dilemma—you never chose between the weapon and your team."

Sasuke gave a twisted smile at Morino, "I may have saved both, but didn't you notice, Proctor?"

There were a number of curious looks then.

"Never once did I put my team in a situation where they would have died if I had failed to save both them and the mission," Sasuke said, knowing it was the truth, and knowing it was what they had been looking for.

There was an exchange of glances, and then Morino Ibiki rose from the table, "Congratulations, Uchiha. You pass."

It was as Sasuke exited the building at the Academy that he sensed Sakura's chakra signature heading towards him, Naruto in tow. There was only one thing remarkable about this, and that was that Sakura's chakra signature was completely normal. It no longer flickered with an underlying melancholy, and it actually seemed on the cheerful side. Considering that chakra signatures only reflected on the overall mood, this change was as drastic as when she first fell into depression.

And if Sakura's overall mood could be call uplifted significantly, it was nothing compared to her outward mood, as Sasuke soon saw, as she came within sight. Upon seeing him, she raced forwards, a wide

smile on her face. She threw her arms around him like she had in the genjutsu, joy bubbling off her.

"Sasuke! You're finished early!" Sakura exclaimed excitedly, "We weren't expecting you so soon. How'd it go?"

"I passed," he stated triumphantly, "I'll be starting the next part of the exam the day after tomorrow. But I doubt that is why you embraced me on sight."

She laughed then, and he was stunned at how genuine it sounded. She was laughing like she had nothing wrong in her life, like her sorrow had been completely erased. How long had it been since he heard her true laughter, laughter untinged with sorrow?

"No, you're right," she said, her eyes sparkling, "They found my father!"

Sasuke was stunned then, and felt genuine surprise take him. He wasn't sure what to say if anything. Slowly, and uncertainly, he put a supportive arm around her, and looked at Naruto. The fox-faced boy gave him a smile, but something looked strained about it. Naruto, while fine on the whole, had something eating at him. He didn't seem happy about the return of Sakura's father—though Sasuke had always gotten the impression that they got along better than he did with Sakura's father.

"What's the matter with you, dobe?" he asked, sounding cocky but a little concerned, and curious at the same time.

"What? I can't give a friendly smile to people, teme?" Naruto replied with a mock retort. He didn't want to voice what was on his mind, evidently.

"Not if it looks like that," Sasuke replied, "It would make children cry."

"Teme, you make children cry without even trying," Naruto countered and Sakura laughed.

"I'm sorry, Sasuke," she said putting a hand over her mouth when he looked at her with raised eyebrows, "But it's true."

Sasuke scowled—she was right. About a month ago, he had been at the grocery store with Sakura, and while he was examining a fresh stock of tomatoes, he had felt something, or rather, someone run into his leg. He had sensed the signature coming, but he didn't think that whoever had hit him would actually collide with him. Looking down he had discovered a young girl, probably no older than six, rubbing her head. When he had asked her if she was all right, her eyes had filled with tears and she ran away crying. Then he heard laughter behind him and found it came from Sakura, who had witnessed the whole thing.

"Seriously?" Naruto asked, taking a turn in laughing.

"I forbid you to ask," Sasuke said, glaring at the blond.

"Well, I guess that's just sworn me to secrecy then," Sakura said, still smiling, "Anyways, now that you're done, what happens now?"

"I vote lunch!" Naruto exclaimed, pumping his fist in the air.

"Fine, and then Sasuke can tell us how the test went," Sakura agreed.

"What about your father? Do you want to go see him?" Sasuke asked.

"We already did. He's at the hospital right now, they'll probably discharge him in a couple days," Sakura replied, "Why, did you want to see him?"

Sasuke shook his head, "Not particularly."

"Save talking for later! I'm hungry!" Naruto complained, and then grabbing Sakura's hand, towed her away. Because her other arm

was wrapped around Sasuke, he was pulled forwards too. And it was in that procession that the three of them left as a team, together.

Kakashi had a bad feeling as he looked at the sheet of paper that held the names of the two people who would be Sasuke's teammates for the Forest of Death part of the exam. Frowning deeply, he folded it up again and stuck it into pocket of his vest. He knew that Tsunade was in a tough spot when she would break the rules of the Chuunin Exam at the will of the council. She didn't usually listen to the council, but this time, it seemed, they had left her little choice.

The one teammate was alright, some kunoichi by the name of Nii Yugito from Kumogakure. But the other one had him worried. He was a young man in Konoha's ANBU, who went by the name of Sai for this mission. What his real name was, Kakashi doubted anyone knew—he had been in ANBU from a very young age. While Kakashi had no dealings with Sai, he had known of him, and was very surprised to see the picture of the pale, handsome man on the sheets for Sasuke's team. He recalled expressing surprise and concern to the Hokage, but she shook her head.

"The Councilors and Danzo want him on the team, to keep an eye on Sasuke. I don't like it either, but it's the only way that they'll let Sasuke in the Exam," Tsunade said, turning her chair and looking darkly out the window in the general direction of the Academy, the sun rising behind it, "...I don't get it...I don't know what they have against Sasuke—they've been on his case since he got here. And while I agree he has to be punished for what he did, I think he's been taught a hard lesson by his own mistakes."

Kakashi said nothing, but stood silently, holding the papers with concern.

"But despite that, it's like they're expecting he'll pull something like Itachi did," Tsunade mumbled, pouring herself some sake, "Like they

think they know something about him that I don't. They don't trust him."

"What about you, Hokage-sama?" Kakashi asked, folding the papers reluctantly.

"I think things will go fine despite Danzo and the councilors spying on him—unlike them, I trust him. And I don't think he'll cause any problems, which seems to be what they're expecting," Tsunade said with a wry smile, "Anyways, please go give those sheets to him. He needs to meet his team before Part Two of the Exam."

"You think he passed?"

"The final stage of the written exam is a moral question—Sasuke knows the answer better than anyone," Tsunade replied looking at Kakashi, "After all, he had the answer handed to him first hand."

Kakashi nodded.

It was noon now, and Kakashi knew that he would be able to find his team at Ichiraku's, because like Tsunade, he knew that Sasuke had passed, and no doubt, Naruto and Sakura would want to celebrate. All that was left was for Sasuke to meet his Exam teammates.

It was mid-afternoon when Sasuke went to meet his new team. Kakashi had come and found him with Sakura and Naruto at lunchtime, telling him that a team had been found for him and that they would both meet him at the village entrance at three o'clock. And then the jounin had left as quickly as he had arrived. He hadn't even mentioned the names of his two new team members nor where they were from.

It was as he was on his way to meeting the new team members, that Sasuke felt the huge signature for the second time that day. He stopped in his tracks, frustrated—he wanted to find out the owner of that signature, and if he lost it now, he might not be able to find it

again. But if he followed it now, he'd be late meeting his teammates, which probably wouldn't leave a good impression. He weighed his options; the signature was in the direction he was headed anyways... He sprinted off, leaping to the rooftops—he didn't want to miss them.

A few minutes later, he realized that the signature was near the village entrance, and the closer he got, he realized he wouldn't be late if the person who had the huge chakra signature was in the vicinity anyways. He leapt down and jogged up the path—the signature was unmoving. Halting in the middle of the street, he looked around at the different people. There weren't that many people in this area, but there were enough for him to need to look for his teammates.

The owner of the signature, on the other hand, was an easy find. She was a kunoichi, about a foot shorter than him, and had long dirty-blond hair tied back in a ponytail. A hand was on her hip and she was wearing an irritated expression on her face as she looked at the person standing next to her. A Kumogakure headband decorated her forehead, but Sasuke couldn't see this until he used senses.

The person standing next to her, however, was not wearing a Kumogakure headband—he was wearing a Konohagakure headband over his forehead. His chakra signature was strange to him—it was the same man he had seen Ino with at the Festival. The same lack of emotion in his chakra signature was unmistakable. He had short dark hair matched inky black eyes and he was wearing one of the most ridiculous shirts Sasuke had ever seen—which was saying something, because *he* had had to wear Orochimaru's awful Otogakure garb. A backpack was slung over this guy's shoulder and a short sword, was strapped to his back. A very fakey smile decorated his face.

It was then that the woman with the tremendous chakra signature caught sight of him. "Are you Uchiha Sasuke?" she called, and then waved him over.

He blinked, and then slowly approached the pair, "Yes..."

"Hi," the woman said with an 'I don't care' attitude, "My name is Nii Yugito, and I'm going to be on your team for the rest of the Chuunin Exam."

She gave a small curt bow, and Sasuke was a little bit surprised. He hadn't expected that the person who he had sensed in Kumogakure and in the exam room was the very person he'd be teamed up with during the Forest of Death. 'Nii', huh...? That would explain why she hadn't been called in before him during the 'interviews'.

He gave her an acknowledging nod and she observed him with mild interest, "This is my first time meeting an Uchiha."

It was when she said this that Sasuke noticed that her eyes were a strange yellow green colour, and that her pupils were slit, like a cat's. Sasuke puzzled over this fact, but said nothing about it. He then turned to the other person present, who was still smiling that very forced smile.

"My name is Sai," he said with a very formal tone, "I, too, will be on your team for the rest of the Chuunin Exam. Please honor me with your friendship."

The young man gave a low bow, and Sasuke thought that the man looked too pale to be in good health. He was almost as pale as Orochimaru, and that was hard to do. Furthermore, it was amazing how pale he was, considering that his outfit exposed so much of his skin to the sun. Again, Sasuke gave an acknowledging nod when he straightened up.

"So, what now?" the girl with the green eyes asked, bringing introductions to an abrupt end.

"We don't know each other at all, so it would probably be best if we learned of each other's techniques so we can know better how each person will react when faced with a challenge in the forest," Sasuke

said, crossing his arms, perfectly fine with formalities brushed out of the way.

"Sounds fine," Nii Yugito said, crossing her arms, "I have to say that even though I'm probably the same age as you guys, I've never taken the exam before."

Sasuke didn't react to this, but was a little surprised, "It's my second time."

"What kinds of techniques do Uchiha-san and Nii-san use?" Sai asked, looking at the two of them.

Sasuke saw the girl's face grow irritated before she responded sharply, "Don't call me Nii-san. I'm not your older brother."

"Ah, I'm terribly sorry," Sai said, bowing low, "What should I call you?"

"Yugito's fine. If you want you can put an honorific suffix on, but I really don't care," she replied, narrowing her slit-pupilled eyes at him, "Anyways. I'm fairly light and speedy, but I can cave someone's teeth in if I need to. I use fire ninjutsu and some dark-element ninjutsu too. I don't have any genjutsu skills at all, but I'm pretty good at taijutsu. My favoured weapons are standard kunai and shuriken."

"I use fire and lightning ninjutsu—though I am able to use some of the other elements as well," Sasuke replied to Sai's question, "I'm mediocre at genjutsu, and good at taijutsu. I rely on speed rather than strength. Favoured weapons are kunai, shuriken, and katana."

"Ah, is that right?" Sai asked, putting on his fake smile—each time he did that, Sasuke felt his dislike for him grow. Sasuke couldn't smile either, he knew, but he at least didn't fake it, "I use water-based ninjutsu and use my ink and brush to create creatures that will do my bidding. I, like Uchiha-san, also rely on speed rather than strength, and I cannot use genjutsu. My taijutsu is at acceptable level, and my weapon of choice is my short sword."

"So we all use speed, and we all use taijutsu well," Sasuke said, summing things up, "Only I can use genjutsu, only Sai can use water, and only Nii can use dark elements."

"Dark elements are dangerous though, so I don't like using them if I can help it," Nii Yugito said quickly, giving him a guarded look, "Call me Yugito, Uchiha."

Sasuke paused and then said to her, "Alright. Call me Sasuke."

"Who will be our team Leader?" Sai asked suddenly, "I think it should be Sasuke-san."

"I didn't say *you* could call me Sasuke," the said Uchiha shot at the phony-smiling boy, "And why me?"

"No, I agree with Sai," Yugito said slowly, like she was thinking it over carefully, "You've taken the exam before, right? And not only that, but you've also got the most skills out of us. You've got all three aspects of jutsu and you've got the Sharingan too."

Sasuke didn't say anything. His new team didn't need to know that he didn't have the Sharingan anymore; while he should trust them—and he mostly did—he wasn't sure if he wanted them to know. Sai was definitely someone he didn't like at this point, and Yugito seemed to be, like him, the lone-wolf type of person. She didn't look like she would betray any of them, but it was obvious she was used to going it alone.

"Fine," Sasuke said after a moments pause, "Though I don't know exactly what you're expecting, making me the team leader."

"You took the test before right? You should have some idea what this 'Forest of Death' might hold," Yugito remarked, putting at hand on her hip.

"And Uchiha-san is highly respected by his peers," Sai said, and Sasuke looked at him with a questioning look, "I've heard much

praise about you from Yamanaka Ino-san, who I met at the New Year's Festival."

Sasuke was right when he remembered this guy being in company with Ino at the Festival. Looking at him now, Sasuke realized that Sai was probably the kind of person that Ino would be attracted to. At least now she was off *his* back—she was Sai's problem now.

"Alright, the Forest challenge is the day after tomorrow," Sasuke said, ignoring the 'peers' comment, "Let's meet tomorrow at Training Ground Three. It's just outside the village—ask the gate guards directions if you don't know how to get there. We'll practice training together—most of the teams we're up against have been together since they graduated, and they have their teamwork down better than us. We need to get some sort of edge in, other than skill."

Yugito gave a small smile—more like the corner of her mouth turned up a little, showing some white teeth, "Heh. Good thing you're leader, I'd have never thought to work on teamwork."

Sasuke didn't say anything in response to this other than: "I'll see guys tomorrow. We'll make it at two o'clock."

A/N: Haha, FINALLY you get to find out the source of the anomaly signature. **BethandMolson** was the only one who guessed right. Yep, that would be Nibi-chan, for those of you who didn't realize who she was. She's the cannon host of the two-tailed cat. (My favourite Bijuu.) She's from Kumogakure, which would be why Sasuke sensed her chakra signature there. Why he can sense her Bijuu chakra all the time and why he can't sense Naruto's all the time is because she has a different kind of seal than Naruto does. A lot of people guessed the host of the Hachibi from the most recent chapters. Uh no... I was quite surprised to find out that Kumogakure had two Bijuu—three if you count Nariko. Besides, I wasn't aware of the existence of Hachibi in Kumogakure when I planned this out, and quite honestly, I was convinced that Orochimaru was host to Hachibi. (Leading to Sasuke being the indirect host of Hachibi and then Japanese legend

would take it's course in which the Eight-tailed Snake and the Nine-tailed Fox would have their epic battle, resulting in the eventually defeat of the Hachibi. All spelling out in my head as: Naruto vs. Sasuke equals dead Sasuke.)

Editor's Note: OK. LET ME SPELL IT OUT FOR YOU. Big chakra a la Naruto in Kumo. Naruto equals Jinchuuriki. Kumo Jinchuuriki? That would be Nibi-san KTHXBYE. A message from your friendly neighbourhood editor (who figured it out instantly).

I wrote that FOREVER ago. XD

Chapter 52

A/N: The sea was full of angry monkeys

A/N: The sea was full of angry monkeys. ...I love Pearls Before Swine.

The next chapter brought to you by: ObsidianSickle; Queen of Semi-Colon Abuse

Chapter Fifty-Two: The Forest of Death

The day before the exam, Sasuke sat with Sakura at lunch time, telling her what he had planned for the exam, and how if the Heaven Scroll-Earth Scroll task still applied, he had thought of methods, using the skill of his teammates and his own, to acquire the other scroll quickly and then pick the best route through the forest to their destination.

"You've really thought this through, haven't you?" Sakura said smiling softly.

"I don't want to fail again," Sasuke said with a shrug, "Judging by the reaction of the judges for the 'interview', I'm probably jounin level in skill, and yet I'm still a genin. I have to become chuunin before I become jounin."

"Also, being a chuunin with exceptional skill is a lot less degrading than being a genin with exceptional skill," Sakura said with a teasing voice.

He gave her a disapproving frown, which only caused her to laugh. She really liked laughing at the expense of his pride. But somehow, he didn't really mind anymore. For some reason, he couldn't get

irritated with her for teasing him...it was just a Sakura thing to do, and after being with her so long, he supposed he was used to it. Though he wasn't going to let her know he didn't care about his pride around her.

"Don't be annoying," he replied shortly, but not harshly.

She just put a hand over her mouth to hide her smile until she could blanch her face. Whenever he asked her to stop teasing him, she always did—he had a feeling that she knew that he didn't care about his pride around her, but she still stopped anyways. She was overly considerate for him, and he wasn't sure if being 'overly' considerate was a good or bad thing.

"What have you got planned for today?" she asked, steering the conversation closer to home.

"I'm supposed to meet my teammates today to practice working together so we're somewhat prepared for the Forest," Sasuke responded, picking up his dishes and carrying them over to the sink, "Why?"

"I just need some time to discuss something important with you, that's all."

Sasuke couldn't see her face, but he heard her voice go a little grim; the atmosphere changed to one of light mirth to one bearing something serious, the air holding back something that Sakura didn't want to talk about but needed to. He turned and looked at her, feeling a concerned frown bear down on his face.

"What's wrong?" he asked her.

"Well, remember how Tsunade-sama wanted to send me home because of my father's MIA status?" Sakura said slowly, "Never mind, you have to go meet your teammates."

"No, I've got time," Sasuke said, coming over and sitting down across from her, giving her a pointed look, "What about it?"

"Well, Kanaye knew that it would probably be better if I stayed here with you, but now that my father's back, and your sight has been restored..." she trailed off for a moment, "When I went to visit my dad later yesterday evening, he said that I should come home."

Sasuke let a stony pause fill the room. "I want you to stay," he said simply, "It is my say whether you go or stay. I want you to stay."

"I know Sasuke, but that might not be good enough," Sakura sighed, "Your sight has returned, so what am I supposed to tell them?"

"Tell them anything," he replied with a shrug, feeling a bit irked by her rebuttal.

"Why do you want me to stay?" she said then, and Sasuke was inwardly taken aback. It was such a direct question; he fumbled for an answer in his mind and then it shut down defensively.

"Because I want you to," he replied shortly.

"But *why*?" Sakura emphasized.

"Why not?"

"You didn't answer my question," she told him exasperatedly.

"You didn't answer mine."

"Sasuke, I could give you a dozen reasons why I shouldn't stay," Sakura said, sighing again, "I don't see why you are so reluctant to tell me why you want me to stay. If you can't tell me why, then I find I might actually have to leave. Tell me now, Sasuke: Why. Don't. You. Want. Me. To. Leave?"

He wasn't facing her at this point, his head turned away looking at something across the kitchen blankly. He could feel her eyes on him,

and a silence stretched out between them. He could sense her mounting anxiety and irritation, but he couldn't rightfully answer. He didn't know why. He couldn't... It was when she opened her mouth to declare something haughtily at him—probably to say she was leaving, that he found an answer slip out.

"You're annoying," he stated, and then added in an almost reluctant murmur: "That's why."

He cast a glance at her, and the expression on her face was one of surprise, like she hadn't expected that answer from him. She looked shocked, like an icy sensation had overcome her, and slowly her outward appearance began to recover itself. He knew there were many ways she could interpret his words, and honestly, *he* didn't know exactly what he had meant.

"I'll inform Tsunade-sama that my mission requires me to stay a little longer, then," she said after a while, rising to her feet.

He didn't move or offer to help as she put her dirty dishes in the sink. Something clouded his mind as he watched her walking around the room, putting things away, and it was as she made her move to leave that he voiced them.

"Sakura?"

"Yeah?"

"You want to stay," it was a statement, but it was a question at the same time. He wanted to know her intentions—again, she was a mystery to him.

"Yes," she replied firmly, yet gently, "I do."

He gave a nod, and she left the room. A few minutes later he heard the back door close and he followed her chakra signature until it was out of range. He was left alone, wondering why it mattered so much to him, and it would be months before he knew the answer.

Haruno Kisho lay on the hospital bed with an expression of abject boredom on his face as he disinterestedly read an article in the magazine he had been given by one of the nurses. It was a couple months old and it wasn't all that interesting. It was a historical magazine that blathered on about the founding of the Village Hidden in Stars—a demure and tiny village with no great influence (in fact, it had such little influence that if the Village was hit by a meteor and wiped out, it would have no impact on any of the Great Shinobi Villages at all). Haruno was spending most of his time looking at the people depicted in the pictures of the article.

He didn't look up when a soft knock was on his door; Sakura had already come to see him before her shift of work and had chatted with him for a while. It was probably a nurse at his door who was here to check his temperature or something unnecessarily silly like that.

"Come in," he said gruffly, turning the page of his magazine and looking at a picture of Uchiha Madara—leader of the Uchiha Clan during the time of the First Hokage.

He expected a nurse to utter a polite greeting but nothing came. Instead, he heard the chair at the foot of his bed scraping against the floor. And when Haruno looked up for an instant he thought Uchiha Madara was sitting on the chair at the end of his bed, staring pointedly at him. It turned out that it was actually Uchiha Sasuke staring at him, black eyes studying him evenly. The boy had the back of the chair turned the opposite direction of its original position and was seated with his arms folded on the chair's back.

Haruno lowered his magazine and cleared his throat, trying to clear away his surprise with it, "Well, to put things quite frankly, I'm surprised that you of all people came to see me."

"And, quite frankly, I'm surprised that I came," the young Uchiha replied.

There was a pause.

"I see that you can see again," Haruno remarked awkwardly, taking note that the Uchiha was actually *looking* at him, "Last time I saw you, you were wandering around your house complaining if anything was moved the slightest inch."

"A miracle worked by Sakura," Sasuke said, blatantly ignoring the furniture remark, "One performed for me when I didn't deserve it, and one in which I owe her an unending debt of gratitude for."

"You're singing quite a different tune than you were years ago," Haruno commented, raising his eyebrows slightly.

"I hadn't met you back then," Sasuke replied, sounding offended, "I hardly think you're in a position to say that."

"I heard things," Haruno replied, a little guarded, "In ANBU, you were a real concern after what happened to the clan."

"Why?" a frown etched itself on the young man's face.

"Well, mostly because of your brother," Haruno replied squarely, "The other concern was that you might strike out on the path of vengeance. Which you did."

"I see," Sasuke replied, and there was another pause after that.

Haruno sighed, "What did you really come to see me for? I doubt you came to see if I was doing well."

Sasuke smirked wryly, "Hardly."

"You're probably as fond of me as I am of you," Haruno replied, his voice equally as wry.

"The reason I came was because Sakura mentioned to me this morning that you suggested to her that she should move out," Sasuke said, getting to the point.

"Yes, I did," Haruno said, narrowing his eyes, "Why?"

"I wanted to ask you why you suggested such a thing," Sasuke said, his expression unchanging, "Especially since she has already stayed in the Uchiha Manor for so long already. Why now?"

"My wife informed me of Sakura's ambition to restore your sight and about her success," Haruno said testily, "In fact, she has remained in your house a lot longer than ever originally intended, and even longer still during my absence. She has accomplished what she has assigned to do, and then some. You know I was never happy with this arrangement—and to your credit, nothing has happened—but now it's time for Sakura to come home."

"I wish for Sakura to stay at the Uchiha Manor longer," Sasuke said, "She said that I would be the one to dismiss her, and despite your suggestion, I asked her to remain longer."

"When did she tell you this?" Haruno asked bemusedly.

"Shortly after she was assigned as my caregiver," Sasuke replied, "Why?"

"She probably told you that you could dismiss her at your volition because she thought you would quickly tire of her and be unable to stand her," Haruno answered simply, trying not to feel smug at the subtle cold glint that appeared in Sasuke's eyes, "Besides, for what reasons would you have her with you? Why should she stay?"

"She promised to restore my sight, but she also promised me my Sharingan once again," Sasuke said quietly, and Haruno raised his eyebrows again, astounded.

"You would hold her to that even though you said you owed her an unending debt of gratitude?" Haruno was flabbergasted.

"I do owe her, but you were the one who asked for a reason why she should stay—I'm giving you one," Sasuke replied tartly, "Because her

own wish to stay doesn't seem to be a good enough one for you."

Haruno was stunned into silence for a moment, a pause which Sasuke took advantage of.

"Anyways, I have some teammates to meet this afternoon, and a Forest of Death to prepare for," Sasuke stated, rising to his feet and turning the chair back to its original position, "While you were gone, Sakura was really upset; try not to land yourself in a situation, or do something, that will distress her again."

The sullen boy left the room and Haruno looked after him in wonderment. Was this really the same Uchiha Sasuke from before? He sighed and picked up his magazine again, staring at the picture of Uchiha Madara.

"You better heed what you preach, Uchiha," he muttered to the open door, "Because whatever distress I caused her will be nothing compared to what you would."

Sasuke stood next to his two temporary teammates with the large crowd of other genin outside the designated meeting point where the Forest of Death challenge to begin. Mitarashi Anko was standing before them all, barking the rules out to them, making the nearest of the genin look frightened. Sasuke wondered, with mild amusement, if all the Proctors had bossy temperaments and loud voices—but then he remembered Genma, the quiet, apathetic Proctor to the Finals, chewing lazily on the end of his toothpick. And then there was Hayate, the Proctor of the Preliminary rounds, who had been hacking his lungs out the whole time he talked to them. Sasuke had heard he had been killed, but he never really had found out. Not that it really concerned him anyways.

"For this part of the exam, we will be handing out scrolls to each team here," Anko was now barking, and Sasuke was surprised—he had thought that they would have put a little variety on the Forest Challenge like they had on the written Exam, "The objective is to

take your scroll to the Tower in the very center of the Forest before noon three days from now. Easy enough, right?"

There were murmurs of agreement from the other teams; Sasuke's team was silent, listening, calculating. He had a pretty good team, he thought to himself—probably not people he could work with long term, but they had good heads on their shoulders and thought alike to him.

" *Wrong !*" Anko snapped, causing half the younger genin to jump, "Not every scroll is the same—at random, some of the scrolls will change, and in order to pass, you must acquire the marked scrolls and head to the Tower. Now some of you will be lucky, and when you pick out your scroll, you will have chosen the marked scroll. *But can you keep it?* The rest of you will have the difficult task of finding those with the marked scrolls and taking them from their owners. There are only three marked scrolls, and there are ten teams here. Twenty-one people will not make the final cut. Nine of you *may* pass, but not everyone has..."

"There are animals in this forest that will attack you, large insects, natural hazards, the other genin, etc.," Anko continued, pointing a thumb over her shoulder, "And then there are your other enemies—bad luck, lack of common sense, and overconfidence. Be careful and you might pass, think quick on your feet, and you might pass, apply your knowledge and expertise and you might pass."

There was a distinct stillness among the handful of genin around them. Sasuke studied the faces of some of them and saw a lot of those whose was the first time taking the exam, looked nervous. Yugito did not look nervous though, even though she had said that it was her first time taking the exam. Sai did not look nervous either, and his face was actually smiling—fake smiling, which didn't really count. Thinking on it, Sasuke didn't know if this was Sai's first time taking the Exam...in fact, the man had mentioned little about his knowledge on the Chuunin Exam. But that could merely mean that *was* taking the exam for the first time. The smile could also be a sign of nervousness. Either way, it wasn't Sasuke's business to know if

Sai had taken the exam before. If he had, fine, he knew the ropes. If he didn't, he had proven well enough in the practice yesterday to show that he could hold his own. Sasuke pushed the thoughts from his mind.

"One last thing before people start getting their scrolls," Anko said with an air of one finishing off a long speech, "Ninjutsu are put on the scrolls, so that you can't open them until two o'clock this afternoon. This is to assure that nobody starts hunting for the marked scrolls just as we've begun. Nobody will know who has a marked scroll and who doesn't until then. Hopefully by that time you will have established a good vantage point to either attack or defend. If you open your scrolls before the designated time, it's an automatic fail—and yes, we can tell, and yes we will find you. Now, come get your scrolls!"

There was a mass scrambling from the younger people and a not so hurried approach from the older ones. Yugito volunteered to get a scroll and returned with it in her hand in short order. Sasuke held out his hand, wordlessly asking if he could examine it, and wordlessly, she handed it over to him. So they had changed it up a bit, he noted with approval—it definitely would make it more interesting. He stood very still, examining the scroll for slight traces of chakra that might determine whether it was marked or not—it would most likely be a very subtle hint of chakra, meaning that there would be no way he would be able to tell who had marked scrolls and who didn't, unless he held the other scrolls. Aside from the ninjutsu on the scroll, he sensed nothing else.

He turned it over in his hand, and on the flap was a seal with the kanji for silver written on it. He looked up at Sai, and then wordlessly put the scroll into the pale man's palm so that he could look at it too, shoving his own hands in his pockets afterwards. Yugito gave him a look and he shrugged in response. He focused his attention to the conversation drifting around him, listening in, hoping he could maybe pick up something useful.

"This seems too easy—" "Are you nuts? This is going to be so hard!"

"So we just gotta get the marked scrolls? I wonder what the markings will be like...I hope it's obvious, because it'll be so hard if it's just a subtle difference."

"See that team over there? With the blonde girl, and the two dark-haired pale guys? They look like they're going to kick our butts seven times over—I mean, did you see how they passed the scroll around without saying a word? The looks they gave each other...it's like they can read minds or something."

"Some of these people look like they'll be easy to pick off, like the guy over there with the boogery nose, and his companions—the girl with the weird hair and I think that's the Sandaime's grandson... But I dunno about that silent group over there, they look hard-core, you know? Better avoid them if we can—I hope they get a marked scroll, because then they won't come after us if we have one too."

"We haven't started yet, and already we're being talked about," Sasuke said to Yugito, somewhat amused.

"Yeah, I know, I can hear them," she replied eying the group that had labeled them as 'hard core'.

Sasuke looked at them too—they were standing farthest away from them. It wasn't as hard for Sasuke to hear them, as it was to distinguish their voices from among the rest, as his hearing was sharp. But he was surprised that Yugito could hear them too.

He masked his surprise and offhandedly commented: "You have exceptional hearing."

"I would say that you do too, Sasuke," she replied, looking at him, as if she was daring him to comment further, "but they were being rather loud."

Sasuke just gave a curt nod. He could take a hint.

"Alright, now that everyone's got their scrolls it's time to set you free," Anko said, approaching the gate and withdrawing a key. She opened the lock and removed the chains; pushing the gates open, she turned the group, "Now off you go—go frolic and gallivant. Oh, and one last thing: try not to get killed, especially if you're from out of the Village. The paperwork is something you can't even begin to imagine."

The teams hurried through the gates as quickly as possible and Sasuke, Sai, and Yugito were one of the last groups that got through. The other teams were already dispersing through the wood, though there were a few who had gone into hiding and were waiting to follow other teams in hopes that they would get lucky and have followed somebody with a marked scroll. He signaled to his team to follow him, picking a route that brought them not too close to the hidden teams and didn't follow anyone else. After a few minutes of travel, they weren't being followed and they weren't near anyone. He signaled for a halt after half an hour and pointed to a gnarled tangle of branches that would provide excellent cover.

They each seated themselves in a ring among the branches—three massive trees had grown close to one another and two or three giant branches and grown intertwined with each other, vying for the precious sunlight that the other branches were blocking out. They were knotted together quite firmly, and were very stable, supporting everyone's weight easily. Sitting down in a particularly thick knoll, Sasuke observed the hideaway; there was evidence to support that they weren't the first ones to use this area for cover. Yugito landed nimbly in the area first, looking around for hazards, and after finding none, gave the all clear to the other two. Sai and Sasuke followed her in, ducking under some overhanging bramble, and then they each sat on different branches.

Yugito had curled up on another branch, draped over it like a cat, eyeing the two young men with her yellow green eyes, "So, we gotta wait for half an hour?"

Sasuke nodded, "It would seem so."

"I usually get tired around this time of day—I'm going to get some sleep," Yugito said, closing her eyes, "Don't worry, I can be up in an instant if attacked, but I'd prefer it if I could rely on you two to forewarn me. Wake me up when the scroll is supposed to change."

She closed her slit-pupilled eyes and seemed to doze off almost right away. Sasuke looked around him then, peeking out from between the branches and out over the forest. As he had predicted back at the end of October, the leaves had all fallen off the trees and all that was left was a desolate wasteland of brown deadwood. He had chosen to wear black garb to better blend in the shadows, because anything blue he had would be a little to stand-outish. Looking out over the wood, he could see mostly branches—they were pretty high off the ground, but not near the canopy—and through the tangled mess he could see the top of the tower in the distance.

The easiest part would be getting to the tower, especially if they already had a marked scroll. Defending it wouldn't be too hard either—or shouldn't be; the training that the three of them had done yesterday proved as much. Sparring one on one with each other had revealed basic techniques that each favoured, and what range they liked to fight at. Yugito was right up close and personal with her taijutsu, practically clawing at you with catlike fury. Sai kept his distance and the instant anyone got close to him, he would leap out of range again and launch a counter attack. Sasuke had sparred in the manner that he had sparred with Sakura when he was blind—not going full out and not holding back enough to make it look like he was holding back. If his teammates were anything like him, they too were holding back on their full potential.

He looked at the dozing Yugito, wondering what this dark-elemental chakra was. He had heard of it before, but he hadn't heard of it in the context of ninjutsu for fighting. Dark-element chakra had been used in Orochimaru's labs, experimenting on individuals. He hadn't known it could be used for anything but. It made him slightly wary of Yugito, but at the same time, she had expressed she didn't like using it—in Otokage, it had been something sought by others. It was a form of

power that most people wanted, and if you had it, you were lucky. Laying a hand subconsciously on his curse mark, he thought about himself. He had wanted to use it against Itachi, that form of dark chakra, but that had been months ago, and now... Well, he couldn't use it anyways, but even if he could, at this point...he didn't think he would. Yugito had the power of dark-element chakra, but she didn't want to use it—so the same thing that made him wary of her also made him trust her, and respect her for it.

"Is your neck hurting, Uchiha-san?" Sai asked, and Sasuke glanced over at the pale young man, "You're rubbing it a little."

"I must have slept in an irregular position last night," Sasuke replied, dropping his hand casually, "I'm fine."

Sai let a pause pass before painting his fake smile across his face, "Ah, I see. As long as you are fine, Uchiha-san."

Sasuke hated that smile, it looked so fake, "Don't do that."

"Do what, Uchiha-san?" Sai asked, looking puzzled.

"Smile like that," Sasuke replied irritably.

All traces of the smile melted away entirely at that point and Sai looked down at the ground, "I apologize—I read in a book once that a smile is the best way to fool someone. It makes you look trustworthy, and it's the best way to get yourself out of trouble, or keep yourself out of it. You don't have to mean it, and it'll still deceive someone."

Sasuke didn't say anything but looked at the man with wary eyes. If he was smiling at him and Yugito so much, did that mean he was trying to deceive them? What could he hope to gain from pretending to be allied with them? What could he possibly want from them?

"Why are you smiling at us then, if you are using it to deceive?" Sasuke said darkly, his hand going to his katana, belted at his side.

This was not what they needed, and he certainly did not want to have let this break out into a fight.

"You misunderstand me, Uchiha-san," Sai said, looking up and at Sasuke's hand on the katana, "I also read that a smile is usually used to engender a friendly feeling. I cannot feel anything, no emotions, nothing—I have no opinion of you, or of Yugito-san. I simply do not feel. Because of this, I did not want you and Yugito-san to be put ill at ease by my emotionless state and was using the smile not to deceive you, but to put you at rest about being on a team with me."

Sasuke frowned slightly, not feel anything? Was that even possible? If it was, he envied the man—the power to be completely indifferent. It was a powerful tool, and a powerful guard. He had tried not caring about things, people, but if he cared about one thing—his revenge—he found that he cared about other things too. He couldn't care about one thing and not about anything else, and he wasn't able to forget about revenge. But to be able to shake everything off, to be free of burden... He let a smirk paint itself over his lips and then loosened his hand on his katana; but no...he had ties now and like never before he appreciated them. The joys they brought outweighed the sorrows, and if he wanted to be able to remain attached with no consequences, he would have to protect them. Suddenly instead of admiring the man sitting across from him, he pitied him.

"Your smile doesn't work," he said finally, "It *looks* fake."

"I know," said Sai, his face still blank, "I have never been able to get it quite right."

"You have to have smiled honestly at least once in your life in order to let it come easily," came the voice of Yugito, and both heads turn towards her; her eyes were closed as she spoke, "If you have never smiled at the joys of life, then you can never smile properly."

Sasuke looked at Sai again, who looked down at the ground again, "Is that how you do it... I see."

Yugito opened one eye and stared at him, "If you can't do it right, then don't do it at all. Personally, I prefer Sasuke's blank face to your fake smile. Besides, I can't stand people who smile all the time, it makes me think they want something from me."

Sai looked up again and then nodded, "Alright. I shall stop smiling for the duration of the exam. Perhaps one day though I shall master it."

"Drop me a letter when you do," Yugito replied yawning.

Sai didn't seem to catch the fact that she was sarcastic because he nodded.

"How much time left until we have to open the scroll?" Yugito asked, stretching out and perching on the branch.

"Anytime now," Sasuke replied, and she leapt down and sat on the branch next to him.

He dug out the scroll and held it in his hand. The three of them sat and stared at it, waiting as the minutes ticked by slowly. After about fifteen minutes—a good ten minutes after when they thought it was supposed to change—nothing phenomenal had happened. Sasuke slipped the scroll back in his pocket and rose to his feet. There was no indication, inside or out, that anything different had happened to it, and if anything was going to happen, it would have happened by that point.

"So what now?" Yugito asked, crossing her arms.

"It will take time to get to the Tower, and for the first day those with the marked scrolls will be fending off those who don't have them," Sasuke said calmly, "I suggest that we scout out the other teams systematically and find a marked scroll."

"How will we do that? This forest is big, even I can tell that," Yugito argued, making a vague gesture towards the woods around them.

"How good are your tracking skills?" Sasuke asked her.

"Poor," she replied shortly.

He looked at Sai.

"Moderately well," Sai admitted.

"We'll head towards the tower—everyone will converge there at one point. Whether it's because they hope to steal the marked scrolls before they get to the tower or if they're in possession of a scroll, the closer we get to the tower, the more signs we'll find of other teams," Sasuke instructed, "For today, we'll head further in and then tomorrow we'll scout out the other teams and find a marked scroll."

"This is why I could never be team leader," Yugito muttered.

"But to locate each team, in hopes of retrieving a marked scroll, when each individual team is moving, how will we be certain that we will not run into the same team twice?" Sai asked, and Yugito had an agreeing expression.

"I will oversee that," Sasuke replied, knowing that he would be able to recognize the chakra signatures if they had already run into the team once before, "I will make sure that we will not run into the same team twice."

"Guys," Yugito called to the two of them as dusk started fading into twilight that evening.

They had been traveling steady throughout the day, and had covered a lot of ground. So far, Sasuke had not detected the signatures of any other team but more than once he had detected the chakra of some genjutsu placed on an area, and had dispelled it almost silently before the other two noticed it. The trouble with the Forest of Death was that it was so large, so the traps set and the genjutsu laid out

could have been set by either the enemy teams or competing teams from years back.

It was getting close to dark, and while Sasuke could see perfectly well in the dark—or rather, sense perfectly in the dark—he wasn't sure how well the other two would be able to travel by night. Yugito had expressed that she had exceptional night vision, and would be fine, and Sai said that he would be fine too. But as Yugito called out to them now, it was still a little light out.

"Guys, can we stop for a second? I don't feel so well," she said.

Sasuke halted, as did Sai, and the two of them leapt over the branch in which she was perched. Yugito was like himself, Sasuke thought, tough and wouldn't admit weakness even in the most dire of situations. So when she said she wasn't feeling well, she was really not feeling well. Sasuke, who had no medical training whatsoever, could see that she was feeling very ill. She looked really sickly in the pale in the fading light, and she was hunched over on branch, holding her stomach. Sasuke frowned with concern.

"You okay?" he asked her, and he could see sweat beaded on her brow.

"I don't know. This has never happ—" she paused to wince as she clenched at her stomach, "—happened before."

"Perhaps it's your menstruation cycle," Sai suggested, his face merely curious by her pained state.

Despite the obvious agony that she was in, she managed to replace her pained expression with one of fury and landed a swift punch in Sai's face. Sai staggered back a bit and almost fell off the branch. Sasuke looked at Sai with annoyance, and surprise at the pale young man's lack of tact.

"No! That's *not* it!" Yugito hissed, a light hue of red coming over her wan face, but Sasuke wondered if maybe that was related to her

anguish instead, "I don't know what's wrong, but I promise you it's *not* that."

At this point, another wave of agony seemed to hit her, and she clutched at her stomach as she vomited, her lunch raining down into the dark forest floor below. Sasuke put a hand on her shoulder to steady her, and she swatted it away, wiping her mouth with her free hand. Sai, rubbing his slightly bruised cheek, came back over, and looked at Sasuke, looking like he was at a total loss of what to do.

Sasuke himself didn't know what to do, he didn't know any medical ninjutsu, and neither did any of the others, it seemed. He didn't know what was wrong with Yugito—it could have been anything, from what she ate to a disease she contracted, or a bug bite or something from the forest. The sky was starting get a really deep blue and the horizon only possessed a thin stripe of yellow over it. They should stop, and try and make up for lost time tomorrow. He had to pass this exam, but he couldn't abandon Yugito either—he'd carry her if he had to.

"Let's find a place to set up camp for the night, and we'll just keep going tomorrow," Sasuke said, looking at Sai, and then at Yugito.

"No!" she insisted, standing up quickly, "We can't stop tonight, we have a plan. I won't hold you down. I just needed to rest for a minute. I can take the pain from here."

"You don't know what was wrong," Sasuke replied sternly, "It could only get worse. Sleep it off."

"No, I'll be fine," Yugito insisted, "I'll be...fine... I'll be—"

Her slit pupils slid out of focus and she started to tip sideways, and in a second too late, Sasuke realized she had fainted. Her body fell off the branch and his fingertips just missed hers as she arched gracefully out of reach. Swearing, Sasuke jumped after her, and he gathered her up in his arms as they fell. Directing chakra in his hands, he grabbed at passing tree branches on the way down,

slowing their descent but tearing the palm of his hand open in the process.

They landed safely on the forest floor, and a good distance away from Yugito's lost lunch. Looking at Yugito, he saw that sweat beaded her brow, and with the back of his injured hand he felt her forehead, dripping blood on her; he was no expert, but he knew for certain that she had fever. Sasuke looked up at the canopy, and saw Sai darting down among the branches, descending towards them. Within seconds the pale young man landed beside them.

"Your hand, Uchiha-san," Sai said, pointing at Sasuke's bleeding and torn palm.

"It's nothing," Sasuke said dismissively, "Let's find a place to camp first."

Sai carried Yugito on his back, as they ran along the forest floor. Sasuke knew that they were leaving a clear trail behind them, but he decided the instant they found a place to take shelter, that he would cast a genjutsu over them just to be safe. The sky was getting darker and darker still, until there wasn't even the yellow stripe on the horizon anymore. It was twenty minutes before Sasuke spotted something that would be suitable. Ahead, there was a thick tangled grove.

The trees looked dark, like they had been set on fire once, scorched by the flames and died. Perhaps a forest fire, or some irresponsible genin and a campfire, either way, it looked to be a good shelter. The trees were so tangled among each other that it was difficult to spot a way to the center. He indicated to Sai a small opening between two trees that would fit the three of them if they went through one at a time.

A sudden yell of anguish caused both boys to jump and Sasuke whirled around, hand on his katana. It was Yugito who had emitted the loud yell; it seemed that she had come to, and her yellow green eyes were glassy with tears of pain. Sai turned his head a little bit as

she was mumbling something in his ear. Sasuke let go of his katana for the second time that day and waited.

"She said the pain is worse than before," Sai recounted.

'All the more reason to set up camp,' Sasuke thought; "Let's hurry."

They dashed across the small area between them and the tangled mess of wood, and as they got closer, Yugito started to wail like an injured cat, her voice rising with the pain. Sasuke would have told her to be quiet, in case enemy ears heard them, but there was nobody in range of his chakra senses.

"Please be quiet Yugito-san," Sai was saying in a soft voice, "We are almost at our campsite."

"It's getting steadily worse," she wailed, but fell into pained whimpering instead.

Sasuke quickly closed his eyes and scanned the dark interior of the tangled grove, surprised to find a large tree rising up in the middle, with a large split in the trunk, a huge hole left for shelter. There was a patch of grass outside the tree, as large as a room, which would be good for a campfire. He motioned Sai to follow him, and once the three of them were on the green, Sasuke checked out the interior of the tree. There didn't seem to be anything living inside.

Sai set Yugito down on the ground outside the tree, at the base of the trunk beside the opening. Tears of pain were running down her cheeks, though she wasn't crying; she was biting her bottom lip to keep from crying out, but quiet whimpers were still escaping her. Sasuke came over and helped her take off her backpack while Sai held her shoulders to steady her. Sai made sure she was leaned against the tree carefully, and then went to prepare a wet washcloth.

"Bedroll?" Sasuke asked, pointing to the roped up role of blankets perched on top of her backpack. She nodded.

He detached it from her backpack and started to untie the neat knots that held it together. Meanwhile Sai had approached Yugito with a wet washcloth, placing it on her forehead. At least they were finally getting a handle on things, Sasuke noted as he tried not to get too much blood on Yugito's bedroll from his hand, once she was resting, he would discuss with Sai what the next best plan of action would be. Yugito was really ill—her overpowering chakra signature was flickering with turbulent reactions, like a large fire being fanned by a violent gale.

Suddenly, there was a surge in the signature that engulfed Yugito, as her signature suddenly snapped out of the mask she had been concealing it with. Sasuke's head jerked up and looked at her at the exact same time that Sai shouted his name.

Yugito was outlined in an aura of dark purple and black, chakra becoming visible to Sasuke's vision—the last time he had been able to see chakra was when he had the Sharingan. Yugito's chakra was manifesting itself in such a concentrated manner that it was visible. Even Sai was fazed. The pale man had taken a step back and looked alarmed, unsure about what to do. The young woman had ceased to whimper and was now just panting heavily, sweat streaking down her face in pale trails of moisture. Her eyes were half lidded shut, but Sasuke could still see their distinct yellow-green colouring. She turned her eyes to him and slowly raised a hand to beckon him.

"Uchiha Sasuke..." she breathed, looking like she was in great pain.

Sasuke slowly rose to his feet and approached her cautiously, uncertain of what to make of the situation. He stood in front of her, and slowly she raised a hand to him, her palm up, looking like she wanted him to take her hand. Confused, he reached for it slowly with his bloody palm, not sure what she wanted.

"She...wants..." Yugito said quietly, closing her eyes, "...you."

Sasuke was confused, but slid his hand into hers anyways. The instant he did so, he felt Yugito's chakra engulf him and then the feeling of his shoulder hitting the ground. The last image in his eyes was that of Yugito's glowing purple chakra.

A/N: Yes, that was Konohamaru's team with the rest of them waiting to start the exam. Writing from Sakura's father's POV was an interesting experience. Never thought I would see that happen. I got this question once, but after being asked, I began wondering how many people will be asking the same. So I'll just say here. **There will not be any SasukexYugito in this fanfic.**

And, omg. Latest Naruto Chapters people? We saw the Raikage! rofl...I personally thought that was hilarious, and killed myself laughing when we saw him. Total drama-kill. Except I hadn't imagined him so...buff? O.o The mustache is pretty close though. XD Maybe he started working out after Team Seven left Kumogakure...he just *wishes* he could be as cool as Sasuke. :p As for why Sasuke didn't sense the Hachibi's chakra in addition to Yugito's, I've decided that in this fic, the Raikage's brother is normal. Well, normal in that he doesn't have the eight-tails. The rest of him is still weird. -.-

Umm...can't think of anything else to say. Questions?

Chapter 53

A/N: Well, I watched the animated part of the Immortal's arc in Shipuuden and I must say, that Yugito is a lot older than I interpreted from the manga. For those of you who thought she was older to begin with, I'm going to stretch things a bit and say she's...nineteen here? It makes it more plausible that she'd still be taking the exam and still be around Sasuke's age. (waves her artist's license around in the air defensively)

Chapter Fifty-Three: Nekomata

It was like one of those dreams in which one walks forever in an endless white void. Sasuke was walking forwards, seeming to cover no ground at all and yet continuing on for miles. It was a dream to Sasuke—nothing seemed out of the ordinary for him. The fact that a few seconds ago Yugito had been enveloped in a strange chakra had completely gone from his mind. He was in a dream state at the moment, and like all things that made little sense in the waking world, it was perfectly normal in the dream.

It was after a while that in the distance he could see a house floating in the void—a house floating in an endless expanse of white was acceptably normal. It looked old, for it was built in the traditional style, and the wood was a little weathered. The paper-covered windows were all shut, and moss and algae grew between the tiles of the roof. Getting closer to the structure he realized it was his house. He was going home, he thought vaguely—it made sense, he supposed.

He walked in the front door, instead of the back one, and took off his shoes, placing them neatly aside before entering the halls. Nobody was home it seemed. Sakura must have been out shopping or something, and thought nothing more of it. He walked into the living

room and a sliding panel that wasn't normally there was open to the backyard, and seated on the edge of the veranda, there was a woman. Sasuke stopped in his tracks—it couldn't possibly be... *her* .

Long, dark brown hair flowed down her back, and she was sitting in a very familiar posture. She was wearing a silk kimono that Sasuke had only seen this person wear at formal occasions, but it was so familiar. Standing where he was, he jumped when a cat streaked past him. It paused and stared at him with two distinct yellow-green eyes, the vertical pupils contracting in an analytical manner. The fur was the colour of tea that had been diluted with much milk, and a tiny bell dangled from the left ear like an earring. The bell tinkled as it trotted over to the woman and stretched luxuriously, two tails flicking nonchalantly.

The woman turned then, looking over her shoulder, and a smile broke over her face. Sasuke stared in disbelief as the he observed the same shaped eyes, the same shaped mouth and the same shaped face that he himself had. There was no doubt at all that this woman was his mother. But his mother had been dead—for years.

"Okaeri, Sasuke," she said warmly, holding out her arms to him.

He didn't know how this was possible, but he didn't care; his mother was here, and without hesitation he rushed into her open arms. She encompassed him in a warm hug, like she had done when he was a child. He clung to her tightly, remembering how she would hold him after he had scraped a knee or cut himself on his kunai by mistake. Little things like that reflected on her love for her child.

She released him and studied his face, a basking glow of pride on her face, "You have grown so much—I've missed you."

"Okaa-san..." he murmured. He every feature was clear and distinct to him, and for the first time since he had arrived in this place, he began to wonder if this was actually a dream.

"You look just like your father when he was your age," she said smiling, but then her face grew concerned, "But when I look into your eyes, I feel such overwhelming sadness—they're dull, and lifeless. The curious spark that was once there has faded, and almost gone out."

Sasuke looked at her and saw a glassy gleam in her eyes, "Don't cry, Kaa-san."

"You have suffered so much. I have been watching over you for so long, and have cried for you, hoping that through some miracle you would stop suffering so needlessly," she told him tenderly, clasping his hands, looking at him meaningfully, "I may have been killed, but I never stopped watching over you."

"Watching me?" he asked slowly, "But this is only a dream, right? I'm dreaming that you're here, aren't I?"

She shook her head at him, "No, Sasuke, this is no dream, it's much more than that."

The cat that he had seen earlier was lying next to his mother, and at that point in their conversation, it rose to its feet, and after stretching again, leapt up onto his mother's shoulders and draped itself there. It looked like a milky brown stole adorned around his mother's neck, its two tails flicking back and forth. It occurred to him then that they had never owned a cat, let alone one with two tails. It twitched its ear, staring at him intently, the little bell tinkling musically.

"What do you mean 'more than a dream'?" he asked his mother as the cat continued to peer unblinkingly at him, the tails swishing.

"I have been watching over you for so many years, Sasuke," she repeated, and he didn't understand, "And finally, I was granted with an opportunity to meet with you one last time."

"What do you mean 'granted'?" Sasuke was beginning to feel that this was less and less of a dream. He was still skeptical despite what

he had been told. Whoever heard of people passed on visiting the living?

"I have been gone from the land of the living for many years, but while the others have passed on, I watched you," she replied tenderly, reaching out and tracing a line down the side of his face affectionately, "I am overjoyed to see you once again, but I am here only to speak with you. It is a great honor for Nekomata to allow the dead to speak to the living one last time."

"Nekomata?"

The cat on his mother's shoulders meowed. His mother reached up, tenderly scratching the cat's chin, and it purred loudly in response, "Nekomata is a demon whose power reigns over the dead. Many centuries ago, her soul was not bound to a human and she lived in corporeal form in the Forest of Death. When her host body entered the forest with you, I begged with her to let me speak to you, and she consented."

He looked at the cat—the narrow face, the large green eyes, the whiskers and the tiny bell. The two tails suggested Bijuu, but as he looked at the relatively ordinary cat, he found it difficult to believe, but perhaps this was a dream, in which case, none of this was true.

"Why in the forest? Why not speak to me the instant I met Yugito?" he asked then, wondering why he bothered to ask, if it was a dream.

"Being entrapped within the bodies of human hosts, her strength is inaccessible," his mother explained, dropping her hand away, but the cat continued to purr, "The seal placed on her keeps her from escaping and using her abilities. There are only a few places on this earth where she can overcome the seal. In this forest, where she once lived in corporeal form, was a focal point of power, and she was able to connect to you."

He was silent for a minute. He had never been superstitious, but neither had he denied the existence of the supernatural. He had

seen Orochimaru be able to raise people from the dead, as long as he had their original bodies. It never lasted long, but yet he had been able to connect to the other side. A demon whose power specialized in that would explain the possibility of this. For now he would not think of it as a dream—if he could.

"What did you want to tell me, Kaa-san?"

His mother sighed sadly, looking away from the cat, her warm brown eyes meeting his.

"Hatred burdens your heart—you carry it around every day," his mother said sorrowfully, "Why Sasuke? Why do you hang on so fiercely to your hatred? Why do you despise your brother?"

"He killed you!" Sasuke replied angrily, incredulous that she did not know, "He killed Tou-san, and the entire clan!"

"I know," she replied sadly, "And I wept for you as I watched you find our bodies, listen to Itachi's explanation, and felt your horror as he tormented you with the Mangekyou Sharingan. I cared then only for you, not myself and my death."

"Don't *you* hate him?" he asked after a moment, the cat's perceptive stare beginning to unnerve him a little in this world that was so real and yet dream-like.

"No," she replied evenly, and he stared at her, bewildered. Not hate him?

"I *have* to take his life—it is the least he can pay with in exchange for stealing so many lives away," Sasuke insisted.

"An eye for an eye? Take out his eyes in exchange for taking ours?" his mother asked calmly, "Sasuke, if everyone was as vengeful as you, the whole world would be blind."

Sasuke paused; the words had struck a cord in him. He could feel his mother watching him, he knew she was trying to make him think, find an answer in himself. He closed his eyes, pain from sadness weighing in his chest. If the whole world went blind, only then would they be able to see the importance of other things they should have realized to begin with, but only to discover them too late.

"Itachi is my son, too. A mother cannot truly hate her child, no matter what he or she has done," his mother continued, and when he opened his mouth, she held up a hand to silence him, "I am dead, now, Sasuke, and no matter what, there is nothing that can be done to change that. Why should I hate him when ultimately it serves no purpose? It will not bring me back to life, but despite your knowing that, your desire for revenge remains strong? Do you know why you feel a need for revenge?"

He couldn't answer that question. In the waking world it had meaning, a purpose. He could answer easily why he needed revenge, but as he thought on it here... Here, in the presence of his mother, whom did not seem to resent being killed, it seemed pointless.

"You seek revenge in hopes that you will find peace by carrying out something that seems to be an act of justice," his mother answered gently, "You seek to avenge the clan out of your own selfish desire to seek answers for what happened."

"But what happened? Why did Itachi kill you?" he found himself imploring against his will.

She merely shook her head, "I could tell you, but they are not answers for me to give. You must ask Itachi why he did what he did. The truth is something you must find yourself. Without vengeance, then shall the truth come easily to you."

He looked down at the ground, the green grass of the lawn outside, the sky the stark white of the endless void. He didn't want to ask Itachi, and he couldn't meet his mother's gaze. She seemed to be

able to read through him like he was glass, he didn't want to upset her by letting her see the undying flames of hatred for his brother still there behind his eyes.

"You have hurt yourself much more than you realize because of your vengeance," she said kindly, mournfully, her gentle voice wavering, "And I've watched you, crying all the while as I saw your hatred undoing the fibre of your being, thread by thread. It does not satisfy the soul to live for revenge."

The whiteness of the landscape changed suddenly, and the yard disappeared. In the distance he could see another place, drawing nearer. When it drew close enough, he saw that it was the Valley of the End, where he had almost killed Naruto. Upon closer inspection, he saw the images of himself and Naruto, fighting. His face was contorted with anger and frustration, and he remembered vividly his inability to understand why Naruto was trying so hard for him—why he wouldn't let him go. There was a pang of guilt in his chest as he observed his twelve-year-old self. Had that image of anger really been so clearly painted on his face?

"Your best friend," his mother pointed out, indicating towards Naruto in his bright orange and blue outfit; he nodded, "You tried to kill him."

"I know," he murmured quietly, regret embedded deeply in his voice.

The two boys shouted at each other, himself bent on murder, Naruto bent on bringing him home. Why hadn't he just listened? Why did he have to be so stupid, and oblivious? Everything leading to that moment had been his fault, and he had hurt so many in the process.

"It hurt me deeply to watch you then, because I knew that you couldn't kill him—you were unable to," out of the corner of his eye, he saw her eyes go glassy again with tears, "Not because you were physically incapable, but because deep down, your heart didn't want you to."

He said nothing, but continued to watch the scene unfold before him. He watched as he stood triumphantly, convinced he had killed Naruto, when a strange chakra began to surround him. He didn't know what it was then, and his twelve-year-old self went rigid with shock; but now he knew what it was, he knew it was the Kyuubi's chakra leaking through to save its host. The cat perched on his mother's shoulders looked at the aura of the demon fox and the two tails went bottlebrush.

"I began to weep then," his mother said, pointing towards his twelve-year-old self as he went into the second level of the curse seal, "Because I knew your humanity was slowly being eaten away from the inside. It would change you. I knew that if you continued down the road you were taking, you would die."

The scene changed to show him walking away from Naruto's unconscious form, walking into the gloom of the forest, away from the light, down into the depths of darkness. He remembered his thoughts and feelings then—thoughts he was forcing out of his mind, but they still pushed on the edge of his awareness. He remembered weariness, hopelessness, lack of purpose, but he still pressed on in the same direction, despite feeling that it was in vain.

"You had fallen," his mother said putting a protective arm around him holding him like she was worried he would slip away at that point, "But you cannot imagine how joyful I was as you left him alive. I knew that there was still a person within you. I embraced you at that moment, when you decided to let him live, though you could not feel me there."

Again the scene change, flashing different scenes before him, involving his time in Otogakure. Training with Orochimaru, watching silently as people were tortured, sitting in the hospital wing waiting to be seen by Kabuto, while casting weary glances at the human experiments with their haunted eyes. He saw his own horror, his doubt, his loneliness.

"Watching you here tore me apart," his mother said sadly, "I was watching you slowly lose yourself to the creature that was born in the grief you felt when you came home on that dreaded night. That creature was nurtured by the hatred you fed it, and I was afraid your fate had been decided."

The scene changed again to show himself in his room at Oto, a kunai in his hand—they day he had taken his sight. The scene unfolded before his eyes, and he winced as he watched the blade pass over his face.

"It was unknown to me at the time, but that was the moment when you created hope for yourself," he heard his mother say, and he looked up at her, seeing that she was smiling softly. The cat, meanwhile, had fallen asleep.

"But your eyes are still faded, your heart still heavy," she told him, the last scene fading to whiteness once more, "You planned on never returning home once you had accomplished in killing your bother. Why?"

The answer was stale and bitter in his mouth when he spoke, "They would have never accepted me back."

"You were wrong though," she replied, shaking her head, letting her protective arm slip off him, "They would have, and they did. They are right now."

He looked out in the yard again, and saw a group of people standing there. They were villagers from Konoha, people he had met in passing, people he had spoken to once or twice. But there were also others. There were people he knew, like Anko, Iruka, Kakashi, the Fifth Hokage, Team Eight, Team Ten, Team Gai, and more. Slowly, each one began to fade away until only Naruto and Sakura remained, smiling acceptingly at him.

"They accept you, and care about you. And she..."

Naruto faded away to leave Sakura standing there alone, a warm smile painted on her face. He wanted to reach out to her, to hold her hand, to invite her in, to introduce her to his mother. He would be happy if he could only do that, but his mother spoke again before he could do a thing.

"... *she* loves you," his mother finished, "Leave you hatred, and embrace those who love you. Let her into your heart, Sasuke, let her return the light to your eyes, allow her to bring you to life."

"But the clan..."

"The clan stopped caring about the living world the instant they died," his mother told him quietly, and then smiled a little, "Almost all of them. Only I remained, to tell you to let go of us...we are no longer bound to the affairs of the living."

"Don't you have any regrets?"

"Only one," she said, closing her eyes, a sad smile on her face, "That I am no able to free my son as he becomes buried in his hatred."

"Kaa-san..."

"But there is someone who is already fulfilling my wish for me. And she loves you so much..."

His mother smiled down at him, stroking his cheek slowly like she had done when he was a little boy. Words were lost to him as thoughts from all different directions flooded his head. Memories from his childhood, pieces of his past, some sorrowful, some happy; thoughts of Sakura came too, kindness and acceptance, her patience with him, her unconditional love for him. The image of his mother grew a little blurred and he closed his eyes before the moisture forming in his eyes could become tears. The next phrase his mother spoke caused him to snap his eyes open again.

"Sakura's right—you do need to learn to smile again."

The cat on his mother's shoulders woke up and leapt down from its perch. It stretched out lazily and then crawled onto his mother's lap, beginning to paw at the ends of her long brown hair. His mother looked down at the cat and then sighed.

"I must leave—Nekomata's willingness to allow me to speak to you is fading," his mother explained with a sad smile, "Though I am happy I was able to speak to you one last time before I pass on."

"Don't go," he implored suddenly. It had all seemed like a dream at first, but now as his mother said she had to leave, he felt that he was wrong. He wouldn't see her again in his lifetime, and there was so much he wanted to tell her, talk to her about.

"I have to, Sasuke," she put a hand on his head, smiling at him softly, "Nekomata's powers over this area have weakened since she left a millennia ago. It was through her kindness that I was able to see you one last time. But there will come a time when we will meet again."

"Can I ask you something before you go?" he asked quickly.

His mother looked down at the cat, which merely curled up into a ball in her lap. One eye was open though, and trained on his mother, as if to say that he could, as long as the answer was not too long.

"What did Tou-san say about me when you two were alone together?"

A smile came to her face, and she looked proud of him as she answered, "He spoke of how resilient you were, persisting at whatever you did even though you were often overshadowed by Itachi. He knew that you were talented, and that you were different than Itachi, and would surpass him in your own strengths. He wanted you to be the best you could be. He loved you, just as much as he loved Itachi."

Sasuke felt like a part of him had been fulfilled upon hearing the answer. Something he never would have gotten an answer to, he had now. Recovering something that he thought was too late to ever acquire. The image of his mother blurred. He rubbed his eyes furiously—he hadn't cried in years, and he wasn't going to start now, not even in a dream.

"This really isn't a dream, is it?" he asked reaching over and giving her a hug, disregarding the cat that was practically squashed between them. He knew the answer, and his mother knew she didn't have to reply. He didn't want her to go—he wanted to stay in this world forever, he never wanted his mother to leave again. The tinkle of the bell on the cat's ear resounded as its ear twitched in irritation.

"I love you, Kaa-san," he said desperately as he began to feel the dream world fade away from him. She needed to hear him say it before he never got a chance to say it again, "And Tou-san, too."

"We know," he heard her reply, but her voice was faint. He could barely feel her holding him anymore, "Goodbye, Sasuke. Live your life with those who love you and those you love."

He felt like he was being jerked away from his mother and in a last desperate attempt to recall her he shouted out to her.

"Kaa-san!" Sasuke called, snapping his eyes open and reaching out towards the last clear image he saw of his mother. But his hands didn't grab hold of the smooth silk folds of his mother's kimono, but instead closed around the coarse fabric of Sai's shirt. It took Sasuke a minute to register the situation, and the surprised look on Sai's face. He hastily let go of the fabric.

"Okaa-san?" Sai echoed, "I apologize, Uchiha-san, but you are mistaken."

Sasuke felt the back of his neck go red, "Why are you crouched beside me like that?"

"I was checking on your condition," Sai replied, missing the unease in Sasuke's voice, "Yugito-san just woke up not that long ago."

"How long were we out?" he asked, sitting up slowly, starting to remember the things that had happened prior to his dream...or was it vision? Not too far off, he saw Yugito crouched by the fire, looking forlorn, "Is she alright?"

"Four hours," Sai replied, "As for Yugito-san, it seems her menstruation cramps have passed."

Sasuke inwardly sweatdropped, but outwardly didn't say anything. Yugito didn't look like she was in pain at all, which was good, but quite the turnaround compared to how she had been feeling earlier. His mother had said in the dream—vision...thing, that this had been the very place where Nekomata lived in her corporeal form. Perhaps the source of Yugito's pain was the fact that they were so close to the demon's point of power.

"It is good you are awake," Sai continued, after drawing his gaze away from Yugito as well, "I was going to search for a source of fresh water, but I was hesitant to leave her to watch over you while you were unconscious—considering her cramps may return."

"Will you be alright by yourself?" Sasuke asked as the artist got up to leave.

Sai studied him with his inky eyes, "I will be fine. This is not my first time taking the exam, Uchiha-san."

Sai crossed the clearing, collecting some water canteens before disappearing between the tangled trunks of some the trees that protected them. Sasuke closed his eyes for a minute, willing himself to push the dream from his mind; he had many questions to ask Yugito but he wasn't sure if they would be responded to positively. Sighing inwardly he hoisted himself off of his bedroll, a searing pain in his palm reminding him of how he had torn it open earlier that night. He looked at the hand in question and saw that it was now

bound and bandaged. Sai must have done that while his was unconscious. Getting up, he slowly wandered across the camp that Sai had set up for them. He sat down next to Yugito, but at a comfortable distance. He had seen her stiffen when he had approached and he didn't want to make her feel any more intimidated than she already was. There was a long pause.

"I'm sorry," she said after a while, not looking at him, but staring determinedly into the fire, "for what happened to you. I didn't mean..."

She refused to look at him. She sat with her knees tucked under her chin and she was hugging her legs close to herself. Her chin was resting on her knees and her face was stony blank as she faced the dancing flames, reflecting them back in her eyes. Eyes that were the same colour as Nekomata's, Sasuke realized.

"You're a Jinchuuriki," he said flatly—it wasn't an accusation.

Yugito looked at him for the first time since she had been overwhelmed by the demon's chakra, a look of absolute shock and terror written on her face. She opened her mouth but shut it again, and gave him a frightened look. She tried to regain her composure but was unable to, and after a while of this, she managed to speak.

"How did you find out?" she asked in a nervous voice.

"She told me, indirectly, that is," he said, pointing at her stomach—roughly the place that was the center of her overwhelmingly powerful chakra signature.

Yugito stared at him, "I didn't mean to! I didn't have any control over what happened. When I took your hand I didn't think anything would happen, I—"

"My best friend is a Jinchuuriki," Sasuke cut her off, "I really don't care about you being a host to a demon."

Surprise was washed from her face by relief, and then she asked, "Really?"

Sasuke merely nodded.

"I knew I wasn't the only one but... I've never met another," she said quietly, "When we get out of this bloody forest, do you think that I could meet him?"

Sasuke allowed a smirk to tug at the corner of his mouth, "You wouldn't like him—he smiles all the time."

"I don't care," Yugito said determinedly, but she was smiling a little, too, "I didn't think people like us could be allowed to smile all the time."

Sasuke didn't say anything to this. He couldn't make comment—it wasn't his place. He had never known or cared why Naruto seemed to be rejected by the majority of the village when he was a boy, but now that he knew that the exuberant orange-clad boy was host to the most powerful demon known to man, things made a little more sense. Naruto wasn't dangerous, in Sasuke's experience, but to those who didn't know him, he *could* be for all they knew. Had Yugito grown up in a similar situation, shunned by everyone around her? Nobody to call teammates because she was considered too dangerous to have any? Rejected by parents and siblings? No friends? Sasuke had never been hated and ignored by everyone, not even when he was brought back to the village, so he knew there was nothing he could say to Yugito now, only listen.

Yugito's yellow-green eyes returned to the fire, hugging her knees closer to her. "That's why I've never taken the Exam before," she confided quietly, "This is the first time the Raikage's ever let me participate in the Exam. I was so happy, even if I would be paired with strangers to help me. Strangers wouldn't know my secret—couldn't judge me—so I wanted so much to make sure nobody found out the truth about me. I didn't want to be mistrusted by my teammates too. You found out though...so, so much for that."

"That wasn't your fault," Sasuke reminded her.

"How is it *not* my fault?" she asked him, sounding sullen.

"What do you mean?"

"Because of me, I rendered us unconscious for four hours, hindering our team and eating up precious time," she began recounting, counting off on her fingers, "Now we're not anywhere close to where we planned on ending up, and I've troubled Sai into taking care of us, no matter how socially clueless he is. I could have ended up hurting you when Nekomata acted up. How can you *not* hate me?"

"It was the demon that caused you pain, it was the demon who knocked us out, it was the demon who caused Sai inconvenience, and I was not hurt by what happened," Sasuke replied reasonably; to his own ears he sounded much like Sakura—maybe she was rubbing off on him after living together for so long, "You are not the demon and the demon is not you."

"Doesn't it concern you that I can't control it?" she pressed, "Don't you think I'm *dangerous* ?"

Sasuke shrugged, "I can defend myself."

"Against a *demon* ?!"

Sasuke shrugged again.

"You have a demon two-tailed cat residing in your body," he said calmly, "It's none of my business, so why should I be bothered by it?"

"Then why mention it to me at all that you knew?" Yugito replied vacantly, "...What did you see?"

"What?"

"Nekomata showed you something, didn't she?" Yugito said slowly, "She showed you something and you wanted to ask me about what

you saw."

A pause, "Yes. That means it wasn't a dream, was it?"

"From what I know about Bijuu—which isn't very much, f.y.i.—they can each control certain element," Yugito began, "Nekomata's domain is death."

"Dark element chakra."

Yugito nodded, "So if she showed you someone who you knew to be dead, then you probably were actually speaking with them."

Sasuke was silent. So it really *hadn't* been a dream. His thoughts wandered over everything his mother said to him then—unlike dreams, each detail was clear and crisp. She had desperately begged him to give up his revenge... But, forsake his revenge? It was all he lived for. Or it used to be, at least. Now he had other things to live for, he realized, besides his revenge, like his friendships, and restored bonds. They were precious to him with a different kind of importance than his revenge held. But he knew he couldn't give up his revenge.

He looked up through the tangled boughs of the trees, barely able to see the sky, but still catching a glimpse of a few stars. Didn't his mother know that Itachi's life was a threat to the rest of the things he lived for? He wasn't sure what to do, or what to even think. It was his mother's last wish for him to release the hatred from his heart... But could he do it?

"You know," Yugito spoke up after the silence had been laid on a little too thickly, "I don't know why Nekomata acted up like that all of a sudden. It's never happened before. I've never known her to desire to speak with a mortal so adamantly."

"Apparently she used to live here in corporeal form centuries ago," Sasuke replied tonelessly, "This is supposed to be something of a place of power for her."

Yugito slowly uncurled from her ball and opted for a cross-legged position on the ground instead. She looked at her stomach. "I didn't know that," she said, putting a hand on it gently.

He studied her, noting that she didn't...he couldn't quite describe it. It was like she was almost friendly while making the comment, yet reprimanding. The words weren't directed at him entirely, either.

"You talk to her?" he asked, and Yugito looked startled.

"Yeah...sometimes," she admitted reluctantly, "Nekomata is both my friend and someone I want to hate, but can't. Out of all the Bijuu, I figure she's the most benign—I was lucky."

"Benign?"

"Like any demon, she can't be trusted, but she's patient and helps me when I ask, though it is a risk, because I know she misses her days of freedom. She's a cat—and she cares about everything as much as cats care about the world around them," Yugito said carefully, "People hate me because they know about her, but she's part of me and the only one I have, since nobody else will let me get close. Befriending a demon...how stupid am I?"

Sasuke shrugged, he couldn't be the judge of that, "If you want my opinion, befriending someone you know you can't trust is acceptable—but when you begin to trust in them absolutely, even when you know they can't be trusted, then *that* is stupidity."

It was around then that Sasuke subconsciously noticed that Sai's signature was back in range and drawing closer to their position. He wasn't sure why he was talking so openly with Yugito, especially since he made a point of avoiding other people's problems, but he found he didn't really mind. Maybe it was because this strange girl, and the demon that was her friend, had allowed him something that he thought he'd never get, or maybe it was because she was a lot like him. Whatever the reason, he found he could be a little talkative

with her as long as she didn't ask about him. There was only one person he had ever allowed to know the most important part of him.

"This is the first time I've ever been able to talk about my demon to anyone like it was normal—okay, maybe not normal, but like it was okay," Yugito commented after a moment's contemplation, "You're all right, Sfasuke."

He could tell it was the closest she could get herself to saying thank-you. He nodded; he didn't care if his teammate was the human container for a demon. After all, he had been on the same team as Naruto for years, and *he was usually* pretty harmless. Usually.

"Oh, and don't tell Sai," she said then, suddenly worried, "I got lucky in that you don't care, but I promise you that's not the case for most people."

Sasuke's eyes flickered towards the segment of gnarled trees where Sai's void-like signature was placed. He had stopped right around the instant Yugito had uttered his name, and Sasuke wondered whether or not the emotionless artist had overheard what Yugito had said to him. Giving an agreeing nod to Yugito, the conversation came to an end and fell into silence; Sasuke began to wait patiently for Sai to make his untimely entrance and give Yugito a bought of anxiety, but for whatever reason, Sai remained unmoving. If Sai had ever demonstrated any sort of social tact in his life, he demonstrated it now, waiting full ten minutes before entering the grove and pretending he hadn't heard a thing.

It was either some rare spark of tact or he had misinterpreted their words and took it that they really had been talking about menstrual cramps.

A/N: Deciding to end it there because anything added further would be waaaaayyyy too long. I've got two more segments planned out, and both of them are too long to fit here.

Note on the 'f.y.i.' part. No, that is not a typo of net speech. I've heard people say 'fyi' out loud—even I say it sometimes, so it just sounded natural in the above conversation.

Oh, oh, oh, and celebrate the beginning of my fourth notebook that I've been using to write in while away from my laptop. I just finished my third one a while ago. I wonder how many notebooks I'll be through by the end?

Important Notice: Unfortunately for me, haven't been getting much written due to a number of circumstances, and I need a three week break in hopes of catching up just a little bit. So unfortunately for all of us, me included, **I will not be updating until Wednesday, October 22nd** . Sorry! I always hate it when I have to do this.

Chapter 54

A/N: Hmmm, I just realized how close I am to finishing this story... and not, at the same time

A/N: Well, well, well. Anyone seen the coloured page of the second most recent manga chapter? It's got a picture of all the hosts to the Bijuu. And guess what. Nariko's actually a guy. And Shichibi-kun is actually a girl. I had a one in four chance of guessing completely and totally wrong, and guess what? I did. :p This is why Probability was my worst unit in math. Anyways, moving on.

Happy Birthday to Felicia-chan who's birthday is tomorrow! :)

Chapter Fifty-Four: Shards of Truth

The journey from the Rock Country to Amegakue took about a month on foot, heavily burdened, traveling within a large group. Contrarily, it took two weeks if on went by themselves and only took a light traveling bundle with them. Because most of the Akatsuki's possessions had been sent ahead of the group, only a few things remained and on November first, the caravan left the base. Of course because of it's discovered location, it could never be returned to, and it would be probably be best if nobody else took up residence. Deidara had had an obvious amount of fun strategically placing explosives throughout the tunnels so they would collapse without collapsing the whole mountain on the leaving party.

The caravan moved at a hurried speed as soon as the explosives went off, as the noise may have attracted unwanted attention to the mountain. Itachi remembered sitting on the back of one of the few wagons they had, Nariko perched next to him. She had been told ahead of time they were going to destroy the fortress and that it was all right. So when loud explosions erupted with large plumes of

smoke and red fireballs, she clapped her hands in childlike delight at the spectacle. She even shyly waved to Deidara who was circling overhead to make sure that there was nothing left as evidence they had been there. He also remembered being slightly unnerved that her reaction was much like that of Sasuke's when he saw the New Year's fireworks for the first time.

The journey had taken three weeks, and Nariko seemed to have relaxed at the sight of the mountain's destruction. The trauma she had experienced with the escape of Haruno had been pushed from her system, and any reservations Itachi had about Nariko's honesty about the affair went with them. Over the time of the journey, Itachi finally began fulfilling his accidental promise of teaching Nariko to read. Every two days he would teach her new hiragana to learn and practice. She seemed so delighted that she sometimes ran off to show Konan whenever she wasn't in the presence of any of the six personas of Pain.

It was towards the end of the second week when they sat in Itachi's room space in the caravan that Nariko had said something that Itachi hadn't been prepared for. It was briefly mentioned and didn't come up again, but Itachi was bothered by it long afterwards, and new suspicions erupted from it.

"Itachi-sama?" Nariko spoke up while in the midst of practicing her hiragana.

"Hm?" he mumbled in return, for this was how most of their conversations started.

"That man you brought back with you and Kisame-sama," Nariko said slowly, not looking at him, "he was just like me, wasn't he? He had a demon in him too."

Itachi put down the book he had been reading. "Where did you hear that?" he asked casually; suspicions of Haruno telling her stories came to his head. True stories, but something she didn't need to know anyways.

" I didn't...he looked at me the first time I saw him," Nariko replied nervously, "And somehow I just knew."

Itachi always had trouble telling if Nariko was lying or not, because she was always nervous, and the subtle hints that would give it away always lingered about her even when he knew she was telling him something that was true.

" Itachi-sama...what happened to him?" Nariko asked quietly.

" We took the demon out of him," Itachi replied, "And we sent him home."

" Was his family happy to see him?" Nariko asked in response.

" I do not know, I was not the one who took him home," Itachi said, the lie slipping out easily.

" Oh," was the quiet reply and then, "When will you take mine?"

" Probably as soon as we arrive in Amegakure," Itachi replied, surprised by the question.

" Okay, then."

And then it had been over; Nariko finished her brushwork, folded the paper into a crane after he checked her penmanship, and that had been that. But a few days later, Nariko had fallen off a wagon, landing between the wheels, and the heavy cart had run over her legs, cracking the bone of one, and breaking the other. She had been bandaged up as quickly as possible but was no longer able to run around. Itachi, who had been in charge of her, was unable to explain how it happened, because he had been right beside her when the accident occurred. But it had occurred when he had turned his back for just a moment...

The sealing could not take place, and Nariko was confined to a bed for two weeks—the demon in her sped up the healing considerably,

but the leader's attention had been diverted elsewhere by the time she was well again. And so it had stayed for the past two months; Nariko had avoided the leader's notice, despite his far-ranging vision.

Itachi wondered if Madara hadn't had a hand in this, but for what reason, Itachi couldn't fathom. Additionally, the persona of Tobi hadn't withdrawn at all to Itachi's knowledge, for Madara hadn't come forth to discuss Itachi's encounter with Sasuke. This meant that it would be sooner rather than later he would be approached.

It would be roughly two months and two weeks since they'd left the hideout, and almost two months since they'd arrived at Amegakure. Nariko was doing better—she was sleeping at the moment, curled up in a ball of blanket in the corner of the entry room of his quarters. It was bigger here, and all high-ranking Akatsuki members had larger quarters, perhaps as a method to compensate for the lousy weather.

Itachi sat up from where he was lying stone-like on top of his bed. It was late, but still too early for him to be able to sleep; he had only been there to make sure Nariko fell asleep. Lately, small accidents had been happening to her, and Itachi wanted to her to stay out of trouble, at least while he was out. Just last week she had slipped on a patch of wet flooring and gashed her hand open on the edge of a rusting metal bracket holding a bit of pipe to the wall. He had had to rush her to the closest hospital to make sure she didn't get tetanus. The inconvenience about Amegakure was that because it was a functioning village, it had no need for an infirmary in one complex. But because of his status, Nariko had been seen right away.

Slipping silently past Nariko, Itachi opened and closed the door to his room, deciding not to lock it for Nariko's sake. He strode down the pipe-lined halls, avoiding the frequent drips that would rain down from different sections of pipe. Not that he minded water, but he wasn't always sure it was water dripping out of the pipes. He didn't really know where he was going but he felt restless, and needed to be moving.

Lights from the streets outside flickered as Itachi passed windows in the hall. A few of the panes of glass were missing but because there was almost never any wind, nothing fell inside. His feet splashed haphazardly through a small puddle that had been the byproduct of some leaky pipes, the only sound that could be heard inside the silent halls aside from the ever-falling rain.

He didn't know how long he'd been walking—five minutes, fifteen minutes, half an hour?—but he hadn't met anyone yet, making him wonder about the hour of the night; surely it wasn't that late yet. He stopped by a section of three windows that had a decent view down a deserted street. The glass was entirely smashed and the shards lay on the floor, crunching under his feet as he drew closer. He remembered Nariko asking him about the rain a month after they arrived.

" When will the rain stop?" she said, pressing her face against the glass of a window—she was delighted by glass, it was hard water, she thought.

" When the leader decides to let it stop falling in Amegakure," Itachi had replied, walking down the hall.

She moved away from the window and jogged after him. "They should call it Amegakirai," she remarked with irritation.

Itachi paused glance at her, allowing an amused smirk to play on the corners of his mouth. It had been pretty witty, coming from Nariko; with a slight change in the ending of the word, she had changed Amegakure—The Village Hidden in Rain—to Amegakirai, or 'I hate the rain'.

" You should tell that to Konan," Itachi said, resuming his pace, "When she is not around the leader."

" Why's that?"

" I am sure she will find it funny."

"The rain does seem to fall endlessly," came a voice from behind Itachi, "It is hard to imagine it is all at Pain's fingertips—that it could just stop in an instant if he wanted it to."

Itachi slowly straightened up from where he had been leaning against the wall, looking out the window, and turned his head towards the speaker, knowing already who it was. Sharingan met Sharingan for an instant before Itachi lowered his eyes respectfully. Uchiha Madara loomed in front of him, arms crossed across his chest.

"Sensei," Itachi mumbled in greeting but said nothing else, keeping his face strictly neutral.

"You said to me back in the Land of Earth that you had news regarding Sasuke," Madara said, getting straight to the point, "When did you run into him?"

"On our way retrieving the Shichibi, Kisame and I encountered a team of Konoha shinobi returning home from a mission," Itachi recounted obediently, "This three-man cell contained a pink-haired kunoichi, Uzumaki Naruto and...Sasuke."

There was a pause of silent surprise from Madara, "He's gone back to Konoha?"

"It would appear that way," Itachi responded, "And it seems he has been with them for some time already, as his former and current teammates seem to place absolute trust in him."

Another pause, "This is unexpected... Did he show any indication that he had defeated Orochimaru? We had anticipated that he might do so, and leave Otogakure."

Itachi shook his head, "Recent reports inform us that Otogakure is still in full operation. I doubt Sasuke could run it himself in Orochimaru's place—he would not inherit the loyalty of his followers.

Besides, I doubt they would be willing to take instructions from out of Konoha."

"In full operation, huh?" Madara muttered, "I've been too long out of control of this body. I'm missing vital bits of information now."

Itachi didn't say anything.

"Well, I suppose we can't keep an eye on him in Konoha," Madara said, "But we should have heard before then that he'd left Oto. Too bad Sasori had to get himself killed before he could meet our spy there. We shall have to see about a new one."

"There is something more you should know," Itachi said calmly, "When I encountered Sasuke, he was blind."

"What?" Madara replied shortly, angrily, "He's lost his sight? How? Did he discover the Mangekyou?"

Itachi shook his head, "I do not know. I do not believe he acquired the Mangekyou or he would have come to try and kill me. I do not believe it to be mere accident either; his Sharingan was too sharp to allow him to be that clumsy. Nor do I believe Orochimaru had a hand in this, for the Sharingan was the sole reason Orochimaru set his sights on him. All of this is speculation, but I believe he took his sight himself."

Madara cursed quietly, "That fool of a boy! For what sane and rational reason would he do something like that?! Or perhaps he's not so foolish as he is lucky. Lucky by accident."

Itachi watched as Madara's Sharingan eye darted around, looking at nothing for long—a habit he did when he was thinking. Whatever was being planned, Itachi found an inward frustration he couldn't explain, a desire to abolish Madara's plans, to tell the older Uchiha that it was pointless, Sasuke had lost his sight, it was over. But he said nothing.

"I will consult you on this matter later, when I have resolved things," Madara said, and then without another word, he left.

Itachi found himself restless again, but for a different reason. He was frustrated and agitated for no apparent reason. He started down the hallways he came, his strides a little quicker than before. Again, the hallways were deserted, but as he walked back, he found someone else who was wandering the halls. After a time, Itachi came across a serious-faced Angel who, like him, was wandering, her eyes gazing despondently out the passing windows. Konan's eyes flicked away from the window and met his when she noticed him. She stopped, watching him as he approached.

When he came in front of her, and was about to pass, he came to a halt too; her eyes regarded him coolly, evenly, and yet almost vacantly, distant. Slowly, he took her hand and raised it to his mouth, kissing it, never breaking eye contact with her.

"You would be so bold as to kiss the Angel of God's hand?" she asked him, her voice sounding serious, but he knew she was teasing.

"That, and I would even dare kiss her lips, too," he replied calmly.

She looked a little surprised then, but she did not move away when he leaned in and put his lips on hers. The kiss was like all the others they'd shared before, passionate but without love. No purpose but for the satisfaction of doing something forbidden and something Pain and Madara disapproved of. Particularly since they were in Amegakure, where Konan had to maintain the appearance of being holy. If they were seen, the both of them would be in trouble. But somehow kissing Konan now, like he had done dozens, if not hundreds of times before, made him feel better about his encounter with Madara.

He pulled away, and he knew she was left breathless. She studied him from under her long lashes, about to open her mouth to say something, but he didn't let her. He just quietly turned away and

resumed walking; behind him, he could feel her staring after him, confused by his sudden actions.

"I can't visit, you know," she said down the hallway.

He said nothing in response, but merely waved his hand dismissively as he turned another corner.

The kiss had been enough.

Whatever time had been lost the previous night was gained back twice as much the next day. Yugito was back in tip-top condition, like she had never been sick before in her life. Nekomata seemed to have lost interest in the forest now that Sasuke's mother was able to deliver her message. The instant they had all woken up, camp had been packed up and they had left without a backward glance.

As Sasuke had suspected, more people were moving towards the tower, and they had already overrun four groups. Two of them had admitted that they did not have a scroll before getting into a conflict, and had showed their silver scrolls as proof. (Ever suspicious, Sasuke had made them empty all their belongings to prove they did not have a marked scroll in addition to the unmarked one.) One of the groups had helped in directing them to a group who they had fought, and lost, for the ownership of a marked scroll. They also said that the marked scrolls were a gold colour instead of silver, bearing the kanji for gold on the seal.

The third group they ambushed refused to reveal whether they had possession of a marked scroll until they were beaten badly by Sasuke's team. The leader, a reluctant Iwagakure genin, begrudgingly admitted they had had their scroll swiped by another group of genin, one of which was loud in personality and kept saying he was going to be the seventh Hokage.

It took only ten minutes to find Konohamaru and those other two people who were his teammates. One was named after a kind of

food, Ramen or Soba, or something, and Sasuke couldn't remember the girl's name at all—what was it with him and names? As it was, Konohamaru thought that they had stumbled across his team by accident, and, thinking they might have a gold scroll, ordered the team to attack, which ended in disastrous results for Team Konohamaru.

At the end of the fight, which took less time than it took to find them to begin with, Sai had a hand placed on Soba's forehead, while the boy windmilled his arms around, trying to land a hit. The girl was lying stomach-down on the ground, with Yugito perched cat-like on her back. Konohamaru was safely out of harms way at Sasuke's feet, tied up by his own scarf.

"You guys think it's over, that we can't get out of this mess—well, you're wrong!" Konohamaru was yelling, struggling in his scarf, "You'll see, Uchiha, you *know* I'm going to be the seventh Hokage!"

"Well good for you, kid," Yugito yawned, "Maybe one day, but not right now. Why do you have such a long scarf anyways?"

"Yugito-san, I believe the psychologists of today have written that the reason he has such a long scarf in his possession is because he feels incompetent about the size of his penis," Sai remarked conversationally.

There was an awkward pause, broken by Yugito when she burst out laughing. Meanwhile, the girl turned a bright red, while her teammate, Ramen, fell over and Konohamaru erupted in loud protests while struggling in the confines of his scarf. Sasuke glanced at Sai's face and mentally facepalmed.

"This is a waste of time," he said over the sound of Yugito as she lapsed into out-of-character giggles, "They obviously don't have the scroll."

"Apparently not," Sai replied calmly, "In addition to lacking other things."

Sasuke pretended not to hear.

"Now what?" Yugito asked, having mostly regained her composure, save a wide grin on her face, "Next group? This makes team number four, and that leaves a fifty percent chance of the next group having a marked scroll."

"Narrowed down further if we get the gold scroll from those who took it from these children," Sasuke added, "Where did they go?"

"Nuh-uh! We're not telling you!" Konohamaru shouted, "We're tracking them ourselves and we're going to take it back! Find your own scroll!"

"It's fair game, kid," Yugito remarked, "Any good at tracking, Sasuke?"

He shrugged, "We'll find them anyways."

"Alright children," Yugito said sweetly, "Kindly tell us which direction you were headed."

"No!"

"Oh, come on, Konohamaru-kun!" the girl said pleadingly, "Those guys beat us badly before. There's no way we could steal it back!"

"We have our pride to avenge though!" Konohamaru replied determinedly, "We'll definitely win it back, Moegi!"

"North, towards the tower," Soba spoke up, studying Moegi sympathetically.

"Udon!" Konohamaru yelled in protest; oops, Sasuke noted—not Soba, Udon.

"Thanks, booger kid," Yugito said, standing up and letting Moegi go, "You, loudmouth. Pride and revenge are overrated. Keep that in mind. After you, Sasuke."

Sasuke, who had momentarily frozen at Yugito's words, brushed it off so he could nod at her. He closed his eyes, thinking and activating his senses. It sounded that whoever had the scroll now might be a little more advanced than an average genin they had come across so far. He would use his senses just to be safe. He motioned for Sai and Yugito to follow him.

"Wait! Are you *really* a genin, Sasuke-san?" Moegi asked, looking for a moment like she thought maybe he was here for some other purpose.

"Only on paper," he replied after a pause, and then he leapt up into the nearest tree, Sai and Yugito in his wake.

Neither Sai nor Yugito commented on his closed eyes; either they were too polite to, or they hadn't noticed. He had been right to activate his senses though, because the group they were after was definitely more up to speed than the rest. Sasuke had already accidentally walked unknowingly through two genjutsu in the form of sheer cliffs, and was only made aware of them when Yugito came to a halt—a horrified look on Yugito's face as she thought he had tried to commit suicide. Also, a few trap wires had been made camouflaged in the forest, but to Sasuke's senses they were thick and as visible as yarn. They were easily avoided when he pointed them out, but whomever they were chasing were definitely going out of their way to avoid being followed.

As they traveled, Sasuke found that every aspect he had ever trained in, in preparation for the Exam, was tested here in the Forest. And each time he was faced with a challenge, he could overcome it easily. But he found that he sometimes found it hard to focus. So much had happened in the past twenty-four hours, and it was hard to put from his mind.

He found he was questioning his purpose for wanting to take the Chuunin Exam—why was he taking it? Was it not to achieve the title of Chuunin? Well, obviously, but to what end? Wasn't he trying to get

it so that he could go on higher ranked missions, and be hired more frequently to work off his sentence? Why work it off? If vengeance was the most important thing, he could leave again, now, and go find Itachi. Or was it because he wanted to regain trust of the village, so he could live here, start a family here? But again, wasn't Itachi in the way? Hadn't Itachi said to him that he was the wall that Sasuke must overcome? As long as Itachi was a threat, there would always be a wall between Sasuke and happiness.

"Hey, Sasuke, you okay?" Yugito called, "You seem a little zoned out."

A stiff nod was his answer. And what about Yugito, his thoughts continued, what had she meant by her comment to Konohamaru? He cleared his head as best as he could, focusing on the branches ahead, searching for signatures. It was then that he realized in his moment of lapsed attention, he had failed to notice that they had caught up with the other team. He cursed his inability to focus. He called the group to an abrupt halt, putting a finger to his lips; they were definitely out of sight, the massive thick branches providing a decent amount of cover, despite the lack of leaves. But were they out of audio range? He hoped they were, otherwise they most likely would have heard Yugito.

He paused, waiting for the group to show any indication that they had heard; initially they had been moving in a northern direction, but now they stopped. Sasuke uttered a curse under his breath; they'd been heard. He motioned some hand signs to Sai and Yugito that they'd stopped; he gave further instructions to them to flank the other team and only attack on his command. The motions were quick and fluid, another portion of Sasuke memory floated back as he remembered having to use these signals frequently. Sai seemed to understand what he was being asked and was away in an instant, but Yugito hung back hesitantly, confusion on her face. Sasuke repeated the hand signs slower, but she seemed to get lost on the instruction to take position silently.

Sasuke made basic gestures to indicate what he wanted, and the pondered over the matter once Yugito, too, had departed. He had thought it fairly clear, but then again, he had learned most of those signals at Oto, and the majority of them were above genin level. Yet Sai had understood them perfectly it seemed. It struck him that there was something vaguely amiss with this piece of information, but he lacked the time to contemplate it further.

Taking off after his two teammates, he settled himself silently among the trees in a position relative to Sai and Yugito so they triangulated the group below. Yugito's enormous chakra signature was very distracting—it was like putting four candles next to a bonfire and trying to pick out the candles. The past few teams were easy pickings and they hadn't really need coordinated strike, and when training, they hadn't been fighting anyone, so Sasuke hadn't taken this into consideration.

But this group was different—chakra signatures by no means indicated power; a chakra signature was something that grew with time and training. A natural affinity for larger chakra also threw off any accurate ways of measuring ability. Having said that, Sasuke could not gage the team's power; he only knew that they didn't have enough chakra experience to be Chuunin level. He knew this team was different from the rest, but that did not mean they would be better than Sasuke's current team. Contrarily, Sabaku no Gaara was a genin when he took the Exam and now, three and a half years later, he was Kazekage. It was better to be safe with this team, and overwhelm a group of unskilled genin, than to be unprepared against a team of potential Kazekages.

Sasuke pressed himself against the trunk of a tree and slowly inched around it so he could get a good view of the team with his senses. He didn't need too much of his body to see around corners with his senses, just an arm and a leg would do, especially if he concentrated his chakra in that one area. From his vantage point he could tell they were from Takigakure, and judging by the way one of the genin held herself, she was the leader. The other two—a boy and

a girl—were waiting in an expectant manner. He could also see the scroll tucked in the side pocket of the boy's backpack. What colour it was, Sasuke couldn't tell. And he didn't dare stick his head around the trunk of the tree to check.

Suddenly the kunoichi who wasn't leader shivered unusually.

"What is it, Michiru?" the leader asked in an urgent whisper.

"I feel this weird chakra sweeping over us...it's like it's scanning us," the girl name Michiru replied—her voice was unnaturally high pitched.

Sasuke was alarmed that she could feel his senses observing them, but he was smart enough to know not to extinguish them instantly—it would only cause suspicions. Slowly, he faded them out, like it was a passing breeze, and hopefully she would think that whatever she had felt had moved on.

"It's gone," the girl said slowly.

"Do you think it was whomever you heard earlier, Risa?" the boy asked.

"Maybe," Risa replied, "I have a feeling they're not gone, though."

"Do you want me to divine?" the boy asked.

"Yes, do."

Sasuke narrowed his eyes; divining did not sound good. He put his hand on his katana handle slowly, wishing he could get a better view. Divining was probably some ninjutsu the boy could use to find them, and Sasuke did not want that—he wanted the preemptive strike. But they also couldn't run into a fight without knowing their enemies. He could try casting a genjutsu on the area to erase their presences, but he didn't know if he could do it on time. Could they just steal the scroll without having to fight?

"Surrounded!" yelled the boy suddenly.

' *To hell with it,*' Sasuke thought as he swung himself around the trunk of the tree, drawing his katana.

Yugito and Sai were quick on the trigger and leapt out of tangles of branches as well, and threw themselves into the fray. The scroll Sasuke had seen earlier in the side pocket of the boy's backpack was indeed gold, and even though he was positioned farthest from him, Sasuke went after him anyways. The leader of the group—Risa—saw this and put herself in between the two of them brandishing a set of tonfa.

He swung at her professionally with his katana and while she did manage to block it with one tonfa he could tell she was barely holding him off. She glared at him and tried to jab him with her other tonfa which had now been concentrated with chakra. He dodged it easily, but it meant having to leap back a bit. This however proved to his advantage as he could tell what kind of chakra she used—this girl was an earth chakra user.

Around him different things were happening. Yugito was attacking the girl with the high-pitched voice, who had pulled out a set of fans with sharp edges. The boy with the scroll was struggling to pull out weapons and put away what looked like a set of divining rods before getting attacked. Sai had taken out a scroll and was painting fluidly on it. Sasuke registered all this while charging his katana with Chidori Nagashi, preparing to aim for the leader to stun her. Yugito seemed to be holding her own against the girl with the fans, though the same could be said about her. Sai had now summoned some ferocious-looking beasts out of his scroll and they were chasing after the boy—who was looking rather nervous.

"Haru, we'll hold them off—get the scroll out of here, and we'll catch up!" the leader ordered the boy, keeping her eyes trained on Sasuke.

"Not likely," hissed Yugito and she nimbly wove her way past the twirling fans, flanking the boy in company with Sai's inked creatures.

The high-pitched girl let out a shriek of frustration, which sounded as pleasant as nails to a chalkboard. Sasuke made a few swings at the leader but she dodged them with as much grace as Yugito. Alright, fine, he didn't want to have to use anything too complicated, because it took a little more effort, but obviously this girl knew her tonfa well.

So she could read his attacks, but could she keep up with his speed? With the speed that the Uchiha were renown for, Sasuke stepped in light circles around her, weaving his katana in through her slower movements, one arm tucked behind his back to lower his air resistance. Taken completely by surprise, the leader realized too late what was happening, by the time she started to block, he had already tapped her right shoulder, her left ankle and several parts on her back. The light electrical zaps caused her limbs to be stunned in paralysis. After a minute, she was on the ground, completely immobilized.

"If I had touched the back of your neck, I would have paralyzed your whole spinal column," Sasuke told her, standing over her, "You left your back wide open."

"Risa!" the boy yelled in alarm.

"Why didn't you then, you bastard?" she snarled acidly.

"It makes breathing difficult," Sasuke replied lightly, "It seemed too cruel."

His gaze shifted from the girl on the ground to the girl with the fans, who was poised in a ready position, but clearly shocked. She hardened her eyes when he looked at her, but his opinion of her remained impassive.

"You're next," he said, and then he dashed towards her.

The fans whirled quickly—much faster than the girl with the tonfa had moved—and Sasuke found she was blocking about forty percent

of his hits. He caught a glance of her face as he swept by in front of her, and for an instant, their eyes met. A smirk spread over her face and he knew he Chidori Nagashi was not affecting her; he leapt back and studied her, both of them poised at the ready. She was covered in little nicks and cuts that he had made on her, but other than a little bleeding, she seemed unharmed.

"Not working for you, lightning boy?" she said sweetly, her high pitched voice making the question sound sickeningly sugary, "I have lightning chakra too, you know. I use it to redirect all your attacks into the ground, where it dissipates; you can't touch me with your weak elemental attacks. I have to admit you're fast, but as long as you keep trying to zap me, I'm not going down!"

It was Sasuke's turn to smirk, "Thank you for correcting me. And here's a tip in return—never tell your enemies how your techniques work. It's a classic mistake. But now I shall have to switch tactics, though I had hoped it wouldn't have to treat you this seriously."

The look on the girl's face looked shocked and offended, "Are you saying I'm no match for you?"

"Precisely," he replied offhandedly, and he took off again.

The cuts that she had been supporting before were bleeding long thin trails of blood down her body, and with greater pressure on his katana, Sasuke nicked deeper cuts across each stream. For an instant Sasuke swore he could have sworn he saw the little droplets flying off in slow motion, but then he blinked and it was gone. He stepped back again, looking at the girl a little guiltily. She was bleeding worse, but Sasuke had made sure not to hit any arteries, but still...she couldn't be older than thirteen. Growing up shinobi meant growing up quickly, but still she and her teammates were too innocent to be Chuunin yet.

She opened her mouth to say something to him—maybe to spit out a curse, but the falling levels of blood caused her eyes to go dull as

she passed out. Too cruel a tactic, perhaps? He didn't know what to think.

"Oi, Sasuke, hurry up!" Yugito called while still bounding after the last remaining genin in company with Sai's hounds. Even Sai seemed rather frustrated that his summons still hadn't been able to catch the boy, and was doodling more creatures across his scroll with a slight frown on his brow.

For seeming to lack any major strength in combat skill, Sasuke had to say that he was impressed by the boy's evasive ability. To elude capture of four inked hounds, Yugito, and still dodge the fire ninjutsu Yugito spit after him in frustration, that was something Sasuke hadn't seen previously. He seemed to weave his way through the branches like a monkey and didn't seem to have any problem with getting snagged by any of them, though he looked rather alarmed that both his teammates were now down for the number and all that was between his enemies and the scroll was him.

"Michiru!" he managed to gasp as he continued to weave in and about the branches around the fight area.

"Come on, Sasuke! Help us catch this slippery lemur!" Yugito snapped before sending another spit of flame after him, "Katon: Ame no Keshizumi no jutsu!"

Sasuke didn't move but looked at the boy carefully as he wove out of Sasuke's way, expecting a new pursuer. Squinting, Sasuke peered at him; it would have been easier to tell with his Sharingan, but something about the boy's movement seemed unnatural. Nobody's luck was that good; Sasuke didn't know Sai or Yugito well, but he knew their fighting style was advanced enough for genin and they should have been able to at least corner the brat. But every time one of Sai's hounds blocked his way, or Yugito's fire ninjutsu came his way, he somehow made it out right in time. Also, his movement seemed a little bit jerky, now that he was paying closer attention. And the chakra signature—it was there, but seemed strange, like it was...

ghostlike for lack of a better description. A phantom signature, a projection...

A projection? Sasuke frowned—he wondered...

"Kai," he muttered to himself, and instantly the boy disappeared, along with the signature, replaced by a completely normal signature behind a large tree three meters from where Sai stood. Sasuke looked at Yugito who was spitting fire at the illusion she was still caught in. Sai seemed oblivious as well, as he was still scrawling.

"Sasuke! Don't just freaking stand there! We're wasting time!" Yugito hollered, sounding frustrated and angry now, "Katon: Charabara na Tanebi no jutsu!"

"Yugito, stop it, you'll burn the forest down at this rate," Sasuke said calmly, walking over to Sai, who paused to meet his gaze questioningly. But Sasuke did not stop at Sai, and instead walked quietly past and to the tree where the boy was hiding. He leapt around it and grabbed the boy's shirt collar, causing a shout of surprise to come from his mouth.

Yugito and Sai's awareness of the boy created a hole in their illusion, and Yugito stopped moving and Sai's hounds fell into pacing impatient circles. Sasuke dragged the struggling boy forwards by the collar of his shirt, using one hand to pull the scroll out from the side pocket of his backpack. He tossed the gold scroll over to Sai, who caught it as Yugito landed on the ground next to him, looking as mad as a hornet.

"You little *beast* !" she hissed, "I'll tear you apart!"

"We have the scroll now," Sasuke interjected, shoving the boy towards his other immobilized teammates, "And he doesn't seem capable of taking it back, so it'll save time if we just leave him."

Yugito still looked venomous, but seemed to let it go. Sai looked as impassive as ever.

"Your teammates are injured—the one called Michiru will need first aid, or she'll lose too much blood," Sasuke said calmly, and then looked at his teammates, "Let's go."

The very day that Sasuke had left for the Forest of Death challenge, Sakura had rolled up her sleeves to tackle a task that she had been meaning to do ages ago. After she had hugged Sasuke goodbye, she had turned around and sought out people whom she could ask for assistance. While Sasuke was out passing the exam—for there was little to no doubt in Sakura's mind that he would pass—she would remove Itachi's room from the house.

The first day she had asked the assistance of Chouji, Lee, and a lone Shikamaru (Ino still seemed to be upset with him and wasn't talking to him,) to assist her in moving furniture out of the room while she talked to Chouji about hiring some relatives of his that were renovators, and on such short notice too. It took the better part of the afternoon to clean out the room; there had been a lot more stuff than Sakura had anticipated and they kept coming across loose items that didn't have a place. Itachi was a lot messier than Sakura had imagined he would be.

It was the next day, while the renovators planned, when Sakura finally sat down to go through Itachi's stuff, which had all been dumped in the living room. She could hear the Akimichi renovators talking Itachi's room, chatting about something or other about the room's construction and structure but Sakura wasn't listening. From what had been a simple task of sorting clothing into one box, ninja weapons into another, it had turned into something more of a fascinating and captivating task. Clothing was quickly done and set aside in a box, forgotten; weapons were only half way done. The box, in which she had discovered Itachi's ANBU gear, had contained something more.

As she had been emptying the box, she found herself slowing down, pausing as she took out the articles. There were strange, state of the art weapons predominantly used by ANBU, protective mesh, gloves... She paused at the mask; it depicted a raven, and Sakura thought the empty face had a distinct haunted look about it. But it was not the weapons and accessories, nor the mask, maps, and scrolls that captivated Sakura's attention. It was towards the bottom of the box that her fingers found something among the miscellaneous items. It was a small photo album.

Taking it carefully out of the box, she examined it curiously. What could Uchiha Itachi possibly have photos of? The album looked rather old, with a brown leather cover—nondescript, but sturdy. Slowly she turned it open, looking at the first page. Each page only held two photos per side, and the first one was of his family, an older family photo than the one Sasuke had been staring at. It showed a slightly younger mother and father, standing on either side of a seven or eight year old Itachi, a toddler Sasuke in his mother's arms. A smile pulled at Sakura's lips as she looked at the small child that had been Sasuke—his night-coloured hair had stuck up in the back even then.

The picture below that was one taken probably not that much later, showing the image of the same young Itachi holding Sasuke's small hand in the kitchen; Sasuke was holding a child's uchiwa fan. Sakura turned the page. More pictures greeted her, and she soon became lost between the pages of the album. Some of the pictures were copies of the ones in the big family album Sakura had found and flipped through, but some of these were ones Sakura had never seen before. There was a picture of Itachi's three man cell, all of them Uchiha—including the instructor. There were numerous pictures of Itachi with one boy and particular, who Sakura guessed was his best friend.

There were also a couple of picture of Itachi with a pretty girl his age, and a few group shots. One was of his Academy graduation class—Itachi was hard to miss because he was obviously the youngest. The

other was of the ANBU Squad the year he probably joined—again he was the youngest.

The older he seemed to get, the fewer pictures seemed to be taken, Sakura noted. There were the most pictures around the time of his early Academy days, and there seemed to be significantly less towards the time of his graduation. After his group shot of the ANBU Team, there were only two pictures left. One was a picture of him and his father at his ANBU Entrance Ceremony—a small event that was held infrequently—and the last photo was the most recent family photo. After that, the album held nothing but blank pages.

Sakura thumbed through the album a second time, thinking deeply. All the photos she saw, every last one, Itachi was smiling, a light of love and happiness always filled his eyes in each photo, even though his face appeared more and more careworn as time went by—the price of being a shinobi: innocence was destroyed too early. Yet this boy, who held his brother so caringly on his back, or played with him or showed him shinobi ninjutsu, had gone on to kill the entire clan. The boy who had been his best friend, and the pretty girl he had held hands with. All of them were dead now, all of them except the little boy with the hair that stuck up at the back, the boy Itachi seemed to care about most.

"Why?" she asked aloud, looking at a picture of Itachi and Sasuke with their mother, eating ice cream.

"Why what?" came a voice from the living room entryway.

Sakura looked up and was surprised to see Shikamaru standing there. She hadn't heard anyone come in.

"I let myself in because those relatives of Chouji are making so much noise with demolishing the outside of the house that I don't think you would have heard me if I had called," Shikamaru said, his hands in his pockets.

"Oh, no, that's okay," Sakura replied, closing the album and putting it aside, "What brings you here?"

"Chouji and I were walking by and we thought we'd see how far they'd gotten along since this morning," Shikamaru replied with a shrug, "Chouji's outside now talking to his cousin-or-other once removed."

"I see. Well, you're welcome to stay to watch if you want," Sakura replied.

"Nah, I don't think we'll stay too long, it all seems way too troublesome," Shikamaru said with his trademark lazy expression—he looked tired at the mere thought of renovating, "The noise is such a bother. I don't know why you trouble yourself. Are you sure it's okay to renovate Sasuke's house while he's gone?"

"Yeah, it should be okay; Sasuke wanted it done anyways. I thought I'd surprise him."

"Surprise or shock?" Shikamaru asked, perfectly serious, but Sakura laughed.

There was a beat of silence.

"Ino still not talking to you?"

Shikamaru shrugged, "Well she'll talk to me only to remind me that she's mad at me and not talking to me, but I still don't know what I did to make her mad."

Sakura shook her head, "Ino will always be Ino."

Sakura knew she could give Shikamaru a shove in the right direction—in fact she knew Ino would probably want her to—but she was not like Ino, and other than words of encouragement, she was not going to meddle in either Shikamaru or Ino's love lives.

Shikamaru was spared having to answer when Chouji came trundling in from the other entrance to the living room, the hall where the bedrooms were. He grinned warmly at Sakura, who jumped at his appearance from the wrong entryway.

"Hi, Sakura," he said in his warm, friendly voice, "They're done knocking down the walls and dealing with the roof corner, but they have a few questions about what you want to do with the excess shingles. It'd be great if you could come out and give your input."

"Okay sure, I'm on my way," she said, laying the album aside.

She rose to her feet and dusted herself off. Then pushing her way through Itachi's scattered belongs she crossed the room. Shikamaru brought up the rear, and it was when she stopped at the entrance to the hall that he almost crashed into her from behind. She looked back to where the album was, remembering her thoughts from earlier.

"What is it?" Shikamaru asked, looking back into the room as well.

She shook her head, "Nothing."

' *Uchiha Itachi...* ' she thought to herself, resuming her walk down the hall, '*Who are you?*'

A/N: Yay, Sakura's back! There has been a distinct lack of her since Sasuke entered the Forest of Death. I miss her...I have lots of SasuSaku planned after the exam, and then finally...eventually...the Kiss! Who's excited? I am. :D

Chapter 55

A/N:

THE FOLLOWING IS VERY IMPORTANT!!! : Okay guys, I think I have to face the terrible truth: I have gotten drastically behind in my writing. Recently with University and with two extra-curricular projects going on, I don't get around to writing as much as I used to. The very fact that I *forgot* to update yesterday, just shows how much my attention has been diverted away from this story. I used to be ten chapters ahead of everyone, but now I've only fallen to three. I also haven't been satisfied with the quality of my writing of late--some of you have noticed, most of you haven't, but I'm still not happy with it. So the verdict is this: I promised you guys I'd finish the story, and I have every intention of keeping that promise. However, a longer break is needed. This time I won't be able to tell you when I will be updating again, because I've resolved not to update until I'm ten chapters ahead of you guys again. Now I know some people will freak out of me, a lot of you will be very sad, and I know I'll lose some readers who only hang onto this story because they love how I update regularly, but I promise this story will be finished. It won't take a year or anything. But it could take a couple of months. Please try to understand, and I'm really really sorry, everyone.

Chapter Fifty-Five: Pride

Keeping the gold scroll was made easy by Sasuke's ability to sense chakra signatures, but it made navigation through the forest very tiresome. Other teams were following them, predominantly Konohamaru and one of the first genin teams they attacked. Knowing they could outrun the other teams, they didn't bother to cover their tracks, other than to tread a little more carefully.

At the very moment, Sasuke was giving signs to his teammates, indicating that there was a team coming in on their right, while another was behind them on the left. Irritated by Konohamaru's persistence, Sasuke got his team to follow him in a zigzagged pattern between the trees in a Northwesterly direction. The team that was now coming in from the right was one he didn't recognize, but if they continued in the direction they were going, and if Konohamaru was dull enough to follow the zigzag, the two teams should meet up, and hopefully fight things out. Five minutes later, Sasuke sensed the signatures come to a stop, facing each other off. He smirked.

Two hours later they stopped for a dinner break, the three of them perched around a campfire; for the time being they seemed to have lost any pursuers and Sasuke had put a genjutsu on the area to prevent them from being found. As it turned out, Sasuke ended up being the best cook, having learned how to cook from Sakura while he was blind. They discovered this from breakfast that morning when Yugito suggested that each person make something and then whoever made the best food would cook the rest of the challenged. Sasuke had won by far.

"I didn't think Sai's cooking was all that bad," he was saying to Yugito now, crouched in front of a stewpot, "I would prefer it if I would set up our defenses."

'Don't worry, Uchiha-san, I believe my ability to set up a perimeter is quite sufficient," Sai replied tonelessly from atop a nearby tree.

Sasuke grumbled—what could Yugito and Sai do? They were genin; noticeably advanced genin—Sai in particular—but genin nonetheless. But then again so was he, on paper, though he'd rather not have to explain to either one of his temporary teammates why he should be considered anything else. He stirred the stewpot with more vigor, mostly to keep the bottom from burning, but it vented some frustration as well. Inwardly, he just thought it was a pain to cook and would rather not be the one doing it.

"Let Sai do it; you've been doing most of the work," Yugito said, stretching out and lying down on the opposite side of the fire from him.

"Including the cooking," Sasuke remarked pointedly.

"Shinobi related, I meant," Yugito stated nonchalantly, "Besides, you and Sai both said my cooking tasted like cat food."

Sasuke didn't say anything.

"So, after we make it to the tower, then what happens?" Yugito asked, watching his hand vigorously stir.

"What do you mean?" he asked, staring at the pot ruefully.

"Well, it's my first time taking the Exam. I wasn't really told the basic structure of the tests."

Sasuke removed the spoon from the pot and stuck it in a bowl where he had been keeping it before.

"Well, the structure is almost the same as it was before, when I took it the first time," he said, "A few things are different, but not so much; the finals should be next."

"What should I expect for that?" Yugito pressed, and Sasuke knew she was determined to make sure she would pass the exam.

"All shinobi who come out of this test with the gold scroll will be fighting each other, tournament style," said Sai, coming and sitting down, evidently finished setting up the perimeter.

"When I took the exam before, the scroll test was set up differently, and too many people made it," Sasuke said, indicating that they could dish up the stew, "We had preliminary finals to lose a few people."

"They won't do that this time, though right? Because there will only be nine people passing, right?" Yugito asked, reaching for the ladle, her bowl in her other hand.

She got a confirming nod from both Sai and Sasuke at this as she poured the stew into her bowl.

"When I took the exam before, there were only two people who survived the Forest of Death trial," Sai said, taking the ladle from Yugito and filling his own bowl to the brim, "Only a few people actually died. This year there may not even be nine contestants—some people may not make the deadline with their scrolls."

"Other genin will have most likely set traps to cause exactly that—there is less chance of losing a match if you don't have that many opponents," Sasuke added, finally taking and filling his bowl, only half full—he wasn't feeling all that hungry, "I think we're ahead by a bit. The others shouldn't give us too much trouble."

"Not that they have yet," Yugito smirked.

"I, too, am impressed by your ability to know when we are being approached," Sai said, studying him, "I was not aware that the Uchiha had such an ability."

Sasuke shrugged, but would not say anything. He trusted Sai enough to watch his back for a few days, but he did not trust him enough to reveal his chakra senses. There was something about Sai that Sasuke was wary of. Maybe it was the lack of emotion in his chakra signature or maybe it was the fact that he seemed much more skilled than he pretended to be. Sasuke himself was holding back on his techniques so he could show them off in the finals without having his opponents know his skills already. So he could understand why Sai might be hiding his own skills, but still something felt off.

The silence that hung now did nothing in the way of keeping Sasuke's thoughts in place. In the conversation before, he had been

very open and conversational, but now he didn't feel like talking much. His mind roamed, drifting back to what Nekomata had allowed him to hear—his mother's final words and wishes. Again he thought about his vengeance. Leaving would mean he was considered a traitor again, but Itachi was a threat, and he was certain that Itachi would likely steal away all things precious again. He couldn't let that happen, no matter the cost, even if it meant he would be considered a traitor again. As long as everyone was safe, as long as Sakura and Naruto were safe.

But it was not what his mother wanted.

And then Yugito had said something earlier that day—about revenge. Something about it not being worth it. He looked at her then.

"What?"

"Earlier, to that one genin group we attacked, you said revenge is overrated," Sasuke answered, "What makes you think that?"

She stared back at him, and Sai turned his head too, to look at him.

"Why do you ask?" Yugito asked, narrowing her eyes.

"Vengeance was once the sole purpose of my life," he said after a moment; he would leave things at that.

Yugito sighed and closed her eyes, "I'd rather not tell you the details but the story goes something like this: My father was the only one who cared about me in Kumogakure, but he was also very proud. Somebody took something from him, something that he cared about most in the world. He challenged the man that took his precious something from him, to win it back, to take revenge and keep his honor. He lost and was killed, leaving me alone. I didn't even think it was worth getting back—I told him so, but he loved that something too much."

"What was it?" Sai asked, his voice quiet, his inky eyes on Yugito.

Yugito glared at him, "If you must know, it was my mother."

Sai looked startled but Sasuke wasn't all that surprised. From what Yugito had told him last night, it seemed to make sense that even her own mother would reject her. That was the likely cause of what caused her mother to seek another man.

"She was a bitch of a woman who hated me," Yugito snapped at Sai, who had opened his mouth to say something more, "She cheated on my father and broke his heart. But he still tried to get her back, and he hated the other man for it. He didn't want to look bad either, with me for a daughter and then his wife leaving him on top of that—he didn't want his reputation to get any worse than it already was. He got himself killed for it."

Sai looked like he had finally caught on and now knew he shouldn't comment further. Sasuke was silent too, but Yugito kept going.

"I loved my father, but vengeance left me all alone," Yugito said ruefully, "I would rather have my mother off with the other man and our reputation in shambles, because at least I would have my father. So that's why, Uchiha—that's why I think revenge is overrated. And that's why I hate people who are proud. Because I think people can admire those who bow their heads in humility, and will respect those who have suffered but can keep going like nothing happened. Forgiveness is...a blessing. And those who can give you blessings like that should be treated like saints."

She snatched Sasuke and Sai's now empty bowls away from them and began to clean up—Sasuke had seen Sakura do the same thing when she was frustrated or angry: start cleaning up a storm. Sasuke had wanted some seconds from the pot, discovering he was hungry after all, but he didn't dare ask for his bowl back. He knew better than to be caught up in Yugito's inner maelstrom any more than he already was.

"I have issues with pride," Yugito was muttering to herself, though quietly enough so Sai probably couldn't hear it, "And that's *another* reason why I hate the Raikage so much."

Yugito's mood didn't improve throughout the evening. And neither did the weather—a cold winter wind swept from the northwest, heralding cold wet rain, followed by big wet flakes of snow. The team was drenched by the time they arrived at the tower's base; Sasuke had suggested they make the final dash to the tower while all the remaining teams sheltered from the elements. By the time they reached the tower, they were borderline hypothermic. In twenty-twenty hindsight, they probably should have waited part of it out, but they had arrived, which was all that mattered.

Sasuke pushed open the doors to a room that was labeled with their names. Inside it was empty and dark, nobody waiting. Last time they had needed to open the two scrolls to find a message, and have Iruka appear before them. The lights had at least been lit then. Sasuke turned to Sai.

"The scroll," he said, holding out his hand.

Wordlessly, Sai dug it out of his backpack and handed it to him. Yugito peered curiously, though she tried her best to hide it; she still seemed upset about what had been said earlier. Ignoring this, Sasuke peeled away the seal that had the kanji for gold on it, and unfurled the scroll. Initially the paper on the inside was blank, but before long, the chakra kicked in and words started to fade into view. There was an elaborate message on the scroll and in the center there was a blank spot. Like before, a missing segment needed to be filled in, in order to activate the final right of passage in the Forest of Death. It was written in Haiku, and Sasuke didn't know the first thing about poetry.

It read:

The trials taken

Were difficult to endure

You are near the end.

To continue on

Name that which caused you to last

List here three virtues.

"I hit a wall," Yugito said, crossing her arms, looking like she regretfully realized that she needed to cooperate with them, "Sasuke, among your many talents, you wouldn't happen to be a poet too, would you?"

He shook his head. Think, he told himself, they couldn't make it *that* hard, otherwise nobody would be able to pass if they knew nothing about poetry, like him. To list three different virtues using up the three lines couldn't be that difficult. The kinds of answers they wanted, but in Haiku...

"I know a little about poetry," Sai said, and both Sasuke and Yugito stared, "My niisan used to write poetry."

"I don't suppose he used it in shinobi arts like you do your drawing?" Yugito commented sarcastically, "Read poetry aloud to his enemies?"

Sai shook his head, "It was just a hobby."

"Well, I know the kinds of answers they want, but you could make hundreds of different poems out of the words," Sasuke said, turning his head back to the scroll.

"It might not matter," Yugito said, "You looked like you were expecting something to happen when you opened the scroll, like you were hoping someone would appear—maybe they'll come and read our poem and see if it's good enough."

He shrugged; he supposed it was worth a try, "So, Sai is writing?"

"What should I write?" Sai said, digging out his ink brush, "The line rhythm is five-seven-five syllables."

"It said list three," Yugito commented, "So it probably won't need to be exceptional prose. Alright...how about cooperation?"

"That's five, so the first line is out," Sasuke said, as Sai inked, "... Trusting in those you don't know."

"Revealing secrets," Yugito said quietly.

Sai scrawled down the last line in silky black ink, and handed the scroll to Sasuke, "The ink is still wet—be careful so it doesn't run."

Nodding Sasuke took the scroll and laid it on the ground. It hadn't taken all that long to figure out the poem, with everyone contributing. Now it seemed too easy. He took a step back, watching the ink carefully. His teammates waited in silence, probably confused of what they were waiting for. And then the last puddle of ink dried. There was a pause, and then...

A distinct 'poof' was heard in company with a cloud of smoke, which cleared with surprising speed. Before them, seated in a collapsible chair, wearing purple-striped pajamas and a lilac bathrobe with matching slippers, and holding a steaming mug of coffee, was Anko. The three of them blinked, Anko jerked in surprise, almost spilling coffee on herself. She leapt to her feet and checked her watch.

"What on earth?" she exclaimed, and then stared at the three of them, "How did you get here?"

"Um, we walked through the door," Yugito offered, crossing her arms, "I take it we weren't expected?"

"I should say not! Or rather, I should have been notified of your coming," Anko retorted, waving her coffee mug dangerously, "I would

have been dressed differently and been waiting for you. I was about to go to bed—in fact I was sitting in *that* chair at a commissary table on the top of the tower, reading a really good book before bed when you just yinked me out of there."

" 'Yinked'?" Yugito echoed, "What kind of book?"

"What do you mean you would have been known we were coming?" Sasuke interjected, caring neither about the choice of creative vocabulary or what Anko's book was about.

"There's a ring of chakra surrounding the tower about two and a half kilometers in radius," Anko answered, "It's harmless, but it should send a signal to the tower when crossed, to let us know you're coming."

"Uchiha-san...did we not cross a line of chakra on our way here?" Sai spoke up.

"Yeah, but that..." Yugito trailed off.

"What?" Anko asked sharply.

"About half an hour before arriving, we encountered some strange chakra lying across our path," Sasuke said calmly, "It went off in either direction for a while as far as I could tell, so instead of trying to find a way around it, I decided to break a segment of it."

"Break...a...segment?" Anko said vaguely, "Are you saying you could *detect* it? It's impossibly subtle though—I've never detected it though I must have crossed it hundreds of times. I only *know* it's there."

"It had similar properties to both the chakra we use to mask signatures and to genjutsu," Sasuke said, without answering Anko's questions—he didn't feel like sharing how he could sense other people's signatures, and subtle chakra, "I just nullified a segment because I thought it was some sort of trap."

Anko just stared and then sighed, "I don't suppose I should be surprised, considering it *is* you, Uchiha. You and Haruno Sakura are tied for first on Konoha's List of Miracle Workers of the Year. Your category would be Impossible Feats, while hers would be Unbelievable Cures."

Sasuke felt the back of his neck go red under Sai and Yugito's surprised gazes. "I already said to the Hokage that I was way too advanced for this Exam. It's really just a formality," he said quietly, his teeth clenched with embarrassment, "And Sakura's more of a miracle worker than I ever will be."

"Alright, alright," Anko said dismissively, "Let's see this poem of yours. I guess you're stuck with having me in my bedtime attire, though I do prefer to wear my special poem-reading outfit. I like it so much that I wear it everyday."

Sai was the only one who chuckled at the bad joke, but it struck Sasuke that he was only forcing himself to laugh because he knew it was supposed to be funny. Also, in the presence of Anko, he'd gone back to his fakey smile again. Anko meanwhile read their poem over and nodded slowly.

"Correct poetry format—not the most inspiring piece of poetry I've ever read, but you guys *are* shinobi, not poets. Sounds like you got through with unusual circumstances, not surprising for an unusual team. Anyways, congratulations—you guys pass."

"Just like that?" Yugito asked, puzzled.

"Yup," Anko said with a yawn, and then sipping her coffee, "Now come on, you guys have to wait the rest of tomorrow out until the rest of the teams arrive. You're the first ones here. And hurry up, I'm tired, and I want to finish the chapter in my book so I can go to bed."

Anko turned and walked over towards a set of metal double doors at the back of the room, and the three of them hurried after her, matching her brisk pace.

"You're drinking coffee before bed?" Yugito commented.

"Yes—I have quite the opposite reaction to it than most people," Anko answered, "I can't fall asleep without having a coffee first, it's something about drinking something warm before I sleep that puts me out. The caffeine makes me a light sleeper though."

"I see," Yugito replied, quirking an eyebrow, "What kind of book were you reading—I like to read."

Anko stopped in her tracks. "Oh, Uchiha, you bring the chair," she said suddenly, seeming to deliberately avoid Yugito's question, "Since it's your fault that I got summoned in my pajamas."

The resounding clack of high heels echoed through the halls of the main building in Amegakure as Konan walked briskly towards a meeting room. She had been kept on her toes since she had arrived, having to step into her role as the Angel of God almost immediately upon arrival. From going to public civilian events to bless them on behalf of their God, Pain, to sitting in on reports from overseers of various outposts, she had trouble emptying a full plate.

She hadn't been able to rest—angels weren't supposed to need sleep, it seemed—and she had hardly seen any of the other members of Akatsuki. Not that she minded not seeing Hidan's foul mouth or having to listen to Zetsu talking to himself, but she did miss talking to Deidara—to her he was someone she was comfortable talking with, the only person she had gotten to know outside the bedroom. To listen to Deidara talk about art was like listening to a child talking about their dreams for the future. It was cute and a little inspiring—it was nice to know that at least one of them had something to look forward to. She would never admit it out loud, but she would allow herself to privately acknowledge that she thought of Deidara as a friend.

And then there was Itachi... Before Nariko had been entrusted in her care, they rarely talked—everything was done professionally, and the

often acted like they only met a week previously. But because of Nariko's apparent attachment to the both of them, they'd talked to each other more than they ever had in all the years they'd both been in Akatsuki. They were closer now, definitely, but would she call him her friend? No, she wouldn't. She and Deidara were what she would call 'friends with benefits', but she and Itachi...? They were just 'benefits'. No, that was before; there was something more than just benefits now, but she didn't know what it was. One thing was certain though: it wasn't love.

She rounded a corner and blinked, as the tall figure of Pain stood alone in the hall. He looked at her when she appeared and when their eyes met; she felt her heart jolt for a second. To see Nagato's eyes in Yahiko's body was always unsettling for her, and Pain knew it. That was why he always talked to her from Yahiko's body rather than any of the others—like he was reminding her of what could happen to her. But it was because he was standing there in Yahiko's body, she knew that he wanted to talk to her specifically.

"Yes?" she asked him, coming to a stop.

It was hard not keeping the bitter tone from her voice, but she somehow managed it.

"I need to speak with you, privately," he said calmly.

Konan looked up and down the hall, "We're alone now. What is it?"

He gave her a stern look, but she knew she was right—nobody was coming, and knowing Pain, he'd know the instant someone did. She returned his gaze impassively.

"Yesterday," he began tartly, "I saw you kiss Uchiha Itachi."

Konan's impassive expression turned stony. Yesterday had been the first time in two weeks that she'd laid eyes on Itachi, and it had been the first type of physical contact they'd had since they'd come to the Land of Rain. So far, she'd been faithful to her assigned role of being

God's Angel. Bt explaining this to Pain was pointless, because she knew he wouldn't believe her. Not only that, but it wasn't Pain's business, even if he was her superior.

"And?" she asked.

"Your station forbids it—the people would be shocked and feel betrayed if they found out that their Messenger from God slept around," Pain answered stingingly.

'No...It would only prove that I'm not some angel after all and you're not some god,' Konan thought bitterly, but replied coolly: "I haven't slept with anyone since we returned here."

"You shouldn't be sleeping with anyone," Pain replied harshly, "I have been far too lenient with you, letting you flirt mercilessly with Deidara and Itachi. You were in his room that one night back in the other base, and probably other times."

"My relationships are not yours to know about," Konan replied, her voice raising a little in volume, "I work myself to death for this organization—I oversee so much, I play the role of Angel, I go on missions, sacrificing myself to get information, everything I do is for this organization! Whatever I do with whatever freedom I have, I have never forgotten my loyalty to Akatsuki. How dare you even keep tabs on me?"

"It undermines my position as leader with your reputation dragging behind me. I need respect from the other members, and I can only gain that by keeping everyone in check," Pain answered icily.

'Hidan won't respect you, no matter how short a leash you put on me,' Konan retorted mentally, *'And what about him anyways? He's the one who gives you the most crap...not me.'*

"Madara and I agree that your relationship with Itachi is dangerous for both of your duties," Pain was now saying.

"You make it sound like we love each other," Konan scoffed.

"That is what makes your actions equally as shameful!" Pain snapped, "Love is a weakness, but to have sex without love is just as shameful as being in love."

"You know I'm loyal to your cause—I just fail to see why you care," she said finally, angry that he had said it outright. Subtlety was what made it okay for her, what made it so she could do keep her pride despite what everyone knew was happening, being accused to blatantly was angering her.

"Because I don't want a whore for a sister!" Pain spat.

Konan paused from shock, and then she let out of a bitter scoff. How dare he say that to her with Yahiko's face? How dare he have the nerve to tell her that after everything they'd suffered? To call her sister, when he was the one who tore apart their war-torn trio that was their family, by killing Yahiko, that was unforgivable.

"It's been many years since you've been a brother to me," she said, her voice icy, "And I don't mean biologically."

And without letting him get another word in, she turned on her heel and stormed back down the hall.

It was evening when someone knocked at the back door of the manor, much to the surprise of Sakura. Setting down the mending she had been occupying herself with, she left the living room and made her way to the back door, only to be further surprised by who was standing on the other side of it. It was her father.

"Dad—hi," Sakura said with astonishment, "They finally let you out of the hospital."

She was glad to see her father, she really was, but when her father shows up on the Uchiha manor doorstep, she wasn't sure if he

brought good or ill tidings with him. Honestly, she had been avoiding talking to him about anything Sasuke-related in hopes he that he would not mention that she needed to move out from the manor and return to her parents' house. She still hadn't come up with a reason for her parents that would permit her to stay. How did one translate 'you're annoying' into a perfectly viable and explainable reason, in normal tongue, from Sasuke speak? The fact that her father was here now, made her worry he was here to confront her directly about the matter. She loved her father, but she loved Sasuke too, and while she felt a little guilty admitting it, it would probably be more painful for her to be away from Sasuke's side than her father's.

"I see there's been some construction done to the house," her father said after a slightly awkward pause, "What's going on?"

"Oh, Sasuke wanted some renovations done to his brother's room," she answered after clearing her throat nervously, "He asked me to oversee it while he was out. This was the only time the renovators could come, you see."

A small little white lie there. Sasuke *had* wanted the room removed, but he right now he didn't even know that it was being removed while in the forest. As for Chouji's cousins, they had returned home for the evening already and would be back tomorrow to put the finishing touches on the siding and roof. There was a very distinct indent in the side of the house where the room used to be. Sakura was hoping to plant a flowerbed there as a nice touch.

"Wasn't that the room where you were sleeping?" her father asked then.

She kicked herself mentally. Of course her father would notice something like that—having to observe floor plans in ANBU and memorizing the layout of a building. She hoped he didn't ask too many questions more, because she couldn't exactly tell him the truth.

"Yeah, it was... Anyways, why are you here, Dad?" she asked, as casually as she could, "Would you like to come in?"

"No, thank you, Sakura," he said in reply, "I came here because I wanted to know if you wanted to do something with me this evening. You seem to be spending it alone anyways."

A warm smile found itself on her face, "Sure, Dad. Do you think... that we could go for ice cream?"

He looked a little surprised at this but he still gave a little crooked grin, "Sure, kiddo, sounds good."

The two of them went to the ice cream shop they used to go to when Sakura was a girl. She hadn't been there in years and the place made her feel nostalgic. She got a vanilla ice cream with a waffle cone, like she did when she was a kid, while her dad got some rocky road ice cream. When they used to come as a family, Sakura remembered her mom would get mango sherbet, and Kanaye would always get chocolate, because tough men didn't eat sissy flavors like vanilla and strawberry.

"Where're mom and Kanaye?" Sakura asked as she thought of them, licking a stray trail of ice cream that tried to escape down the side of her cone.

"Your mother and Fumio-san are having a mahjong night at the Yamanaka's house tonight," her father answered; Fumio was their next door neighbor, "And Kanaye was sent away on another mission last night, and says he doesn't expect to be back for a couple of weeks."

"I hate it when he leaves without saying goodbye," Sakura said in response; she was afraid Kanaye would go missing or killed without having gotten to say goodbye... "Where is he going this time?"

"Far north," her father replied, "He said to tell you he'll be bringing some pink, fluffy earmuffs back for Uchiha."

'I'm sure Sasuke would appreciate that,' she thought with a sarcastic snort, "He's going so far north in the winter—I can't say I envy him. Though we're kinda strange by eating ice cream in the winter too."

"The weather has been pretty good these past few days," her father replied, "But the rain last night was unexpectedly cold."

"Mmm," Sakura hummed in agreement, "I wonder how the genin fared in the weather last night..."

She hoped Sasuke and his team had managed to find shelter. It was so easy to get hypothermia this time of year, especially with sleet and rain like yesterday. There were so many who came into the hospital with frostbite and with injuries from ice and snow, too. She hoped Sasuke's desire to pass hadn't prevented him from waiting out the poor weather.

"Don't fret your pretty head about Uchiha," her father remarked distastefully, "If he can survive leaving Konoha without being stopped, live three years with Orochimaru, and come back only to escape the village council beating him to a pulp, he can survive three days in a forest."

He sounded like he was rather disappointed that Sasuke didn't get a beating from the councilors, but Sakura knew how close a thing it had been to actually happening. She frowned a little, but tried to reply with as little disapproval in her voice as possible. She didn't want to fight with her father now, she had asked if they could go out for ice cream to try and bridge some gaps, not pry them farther apart.

"I wish you would be a little nicer to Sasuke sometimes," she said patiently, "He's been doing great. And I know that you don't like that I'm in love with a traitor, but when you were gone, he was really supportive to me, and that helped, you know?"

Her father set his jaw, "Don't chew me out about him, too. Your mother already made a case for him, though she does admit she's a

little upset that you've ended up staying as long as you have. But she didn't want me to force you out of that house. It also seems he's won over your brother too, who likes to talk about him, and how badly he beat Uchiha during katana training. They seem to like him—I can't really go against the judgment of my whole family."

"Okay, good, as long as you don't completely hate him," she was relieved to hear her mother had defended Sasuke, even though she was worried about her daughter, and maybe if she could convince her mother to let her stay, her mother would change her father's mind again.

"While on the topic of Uchiha," her father said casually, and Sakura felt her stomach clench—she had been hoping to avoid the topic of living with him, but after what her father had said about her mother, she supposed it was inevitable at this point, "Did you really promise Uchiha his Sharingan back?"

This surprised her; she hadn't told anyone that she planned to attempt the feat of restoring the Sharingan. Only Sasuke knew that she was going to try and accomplish it, and he thought she was crazy for even thinking of it. She knew others would think the same way if she voiced it—that was why she had kept her lips sealed. She hadn't even mentioned it in the reports she sent to Tsunade.

"Yes, I did," she replied slowly, "How did you know?"

"Uchiha came to visit me in the hospital a few hours before I was discharged," her father replied, "Said that you wanted to stay. He said that if I needed a reason better than that, that I let you remain in order to restore his Sharingan."

Of course! Sasuke was a genius, as per usual, though she couldn't think of why he didn't tell her he'd thought of a good reason. It would have calmed her nerves some if he had. Regardless, it was the perfect reason.

"Now, before I even allow you the notion that I'm even remotely considering it, I want you to tell me if it's even possible," her father continued, "because I wouldn't put it past you to pull something like that."

"Well, the probability of his sight returning was really low to start with," Sakura said carefully, "Since he has his sight now, that should significantly increase the chances of the Sharingan returning as well. After all, it's in his blood whether his eyes are damaged or not. I don't think it should be a difficult manner of applying it to the newly healed eyes."

She was not, of course, going to mention that the previous percentage of the Sharingan returning was a figure of one-point-something-or-other percent, but the chances should increase tenfold. Making her new estimated figure just over ten percent. It was still low odds, but then again, she had taken a four percent chance and won—she was going to make a habit of beating bad odds, and she wasn't going to let this ruin her new winning streak. And besides, she had promised, hadn't she? No matter the numbers it didn't matter because she had to make it happen anyways.

"I see," her father mused, "That is good to hear, I suppose. How were you planning on getting it back?"

"I'm not sure yet—he's been so busy with Exam prep that we never got to discuss it," she answered—truthfully, he had been too worried and preoccupied about her 'recall' to think about the Sharingan.

"Why can't you just move back home and then just visit to restore the Sharingan?" he father asked.

He had her there. She wished she could have talked to Sasuke about this so she could have been better prepared to answer these questions. She made a mental note to herself to bug Sasuke about this when he got back.

"Actually, I don't know why you want to stay so badly anyways," her father went on, sparing her the need to answer, "Uchiha didn't really specify his reason for wanting you there either."

"Because I love him, Dad," she answered with exasperation.

"You know I don't like that answer."

Sakura was puzzled for a moment and then understood, "I know, I know—you're afraid he's going to jump me. Correction—that he's going to jump me and I'm going to let him."

Her father turned a funny embarrassed sort of colour, startled into silence. He looked a little angry too, like he was saying: 'damn right, that's what I'm worried about.'

"Dad," she said tenderly, reaching across the table and holding her father's hand in hers, "We've been living together for months now, and I think that if there was any sort of spark between us, it probably would have happened a long time ago. Right now, my love is unrequited, and personally, I'm amazed that Sasuke isn't weirded out by that and thrown me from his home ages ago."

"Though the removal of the room you were sleeping in does seem like an obvious hint," her father said in a joking sort of voice—her father wasn't very good at being all that funny, sometimes she wished he would just stop trying. But Sakura at least knew that he wasn't all that serious about the statement. But the next question was serious, "Where are you sleeping now?"

"For the time being I've moved back into Sasuke's room," she said—technically she had never moved out of it, but her father was *not* going to find out.

"What?"

"He's been out in the forest these past few days, I'll talk to him when he gets back," she assured her father, her mouth feeling more and

more bitter with each lie. Though the last statement wasn't exactly a lie—more like...creative truth telling.

"Why don't you move into his parents' old room?" her father suggested.

"I don't think so, Dad. The master bedroom is still sorta sacred ground—I don't want to camp out there," she replied, hesitantly. That much was true, Sasuke had avoided his parents room as much as he had Itachi's, though Sakura could tell it was for an entirely different reason. He treated it more as a sad reminder rather than something that was a foreboding presence.

"What about the study you put me in?" her father pressed, and she knew he really wasn't happy with the idea of her being in Sasuke's room. Obviously he was worried that she would continue to be in Sasuke's room even after he returned from the Forest challenge. It definitely would *not* be a good idea to let her father find out that they never were out of the same room and that she was actually sleeping in his bed.

"I'll talk to Sasuke," she told him, "Don't worry, Dad. I won't let anything happen."

"I hope so."

Half an hour after she had bid her father a good evening when he left her at the Uchiha manor, she was in her flannel pajama pants and white spaghetti-strap tank top, towel drying her wet locks after a quick shower before bed. She definitely would have to talk to Sasuke about everything that had happened, but not in the regards of moving rooms. Her father said he would think about letting her stay a little longer, but made no promises. She hung her towel on the chair in front of the desk and then slid between the blankets on the bed.

She curled up in a ball and buried her face in a pillow, inhaling his scent. Even though Sasuke was in the Forest of Death, she still had slept in his bed—the futon that she and Kanaye had set up in the

corner hadn't been touched for months. But even though she was sleeping in his bed, there was still something missing, and she knew exactly what it was: it was the presence of a warm body—a warm body belonging to a specific someone—in her arms.

A/N: Bit with Pain and Konan talking about siblings refers to my theory that Nagato and Konan were siblings. Once disposing of his own body and inhabiting others, it does technically make PainxKonan possible, but in my head it's still incest-ish. Yeah. If it turns out they were never related, then it's easy to change, because the rest of the conversation still makes sense minus the biological comment.

Chapter 56

A/N: Hey guys! Hisashiburi, ne? It's been a while. Sorry this took forever to update. I got stuck on some parts, and then I was really busy with school up until Christmas break. And then I was busy until after Christmas, so I actually didn't get writing until just after Christmas. There were some moments of free time...but then I wasted it by watching Bleach and reading Death Note and playing Tales of Symphonia: Dawn of the New World... (guilty) But, I finally got all caught up!

In other Blind related news: the FAQ section and Arc section have been updated, so take a peek if you want. That, and this day marks Blind's second birthday!!! Yays! My gods, it's taken forever to write this fic. I thought maybe a year at most, but two years later after posting chapter one... And here I am toying with the idea of a sequel. There must be something wrong with me. Anyways, I should like...eat cake or something to celebrate. :p

Also, I get this question a lot, but I don't want to put it up on the FAQ because of spoiler reasons for those who haven't read this far: Yes, Sasuke can see again. 100% perfectly. But **not does has** Sharingan.

Chapter Fifty-Six: Forming the Ties that Bind

A pillow to the head was one of the not so smart ways to wake up Sasuke in the morning. In fact on the list of practical ways to wake Sasuke up, it would score on the bottom five. But that was how Yugito woke him on the final day of the Forest of Death trial. The deadline had been the previous afternoon, and while a few strays were being rounded up, those who made it to the tower successfully were made to wait until the next morning. Sasuke had gone to bed

late and was tired beyond belief, and when he was hit by a pillow he wasn't pleased.

His first thought was that he was being attacked, and he had made a wild leap for a kunai under his pillow. There was no kunai, and his hand closed over his headband instead. His next reaction was to roll over and glare at the perpetrator, who was obviously Naruto—or at least it had made sense in Sasuke's sleepy mind. Instead he saw Yugito perched catlike across from him on Sai's empty bed in the room he and the inky-eyed artist had shared. He blinked.

"What was that for?" he asked grumpily.

"The strays have been picked up, we're assembling in three hours to hear the grand speech," Yugito replied, "I thought you should probably get up."

"Was the pillow really necessary?" Sasuke grumbled, and then he looked at the door, which was locked from the inside, "How'd you get in here?"

"I came through the window," Yugito answered as if it was the most normal thing in the world to climb through people's windows while they were sleeping.

"What?"

"I was bored, so I went poking around the tower," Yugito said shrugging, "I came by your window a couple of hours ago and when I came back you were still asleep. Found some pretty cool things and a nice view from the tower. I also found out what book Mitarashi was reading—have you ever heard of Icha Icha Paradise?"

"There's only a foot-wide ledge outside my window," Sasuke stated, ignoring the latter question, preferring not to know why Anko was reading Kakashi's favourite books. In fact, it was probably Kakashi's fault that Anko was reading them, now that Sasuke thought about it, though he'd rather not.

"I have catlike reflexes and balance," Yugito said, "for obvious reasons."

Sasuke fell back on his pillow with a groan, "Why did you wake me up now? It's too soon before the speech."

"I thought you might want some time to get ready—you always look so sharp that I know it must take you at least half an hour to get your hair to stick up like that," Yugito said with a yawn earning herself a glare.

"My hair *grows* like this," Sasuke said with irritation.

"Seriously?" Yugito remarked, "Your hair grows like a duck's butt?"

"Shut up," he muttered in automatic response.

"Well, whatever," she said shrugging, "You should still get up."

"Maybe in another hour," Sasuke said, closing his eyes sleepily.

"Why are you so tired anyways?" Yugito asked, sounding amazed, "You weren't like this at all out in the woods."

Sasuke didn't answer. The truth was that he had tried to go to sleep, but he had been unable to for the longest time. Thoughts of what he should do about his revenge kept eating at his mind, and then there was the fact that he hadn't seen Sakura since before he left and spending time with two withdrawn stoic people made him really miss her company, and her bright smile. Only her smile would be able to negate the image of Sai's fake one which the said artist hadn't dropped since they'd come to the tower. And lastly, he would reluctantly admit it, but there just was something not quite right about sleeping in a bed without Sakura being there. He had rolled over and over in bed last night trying to find a comfortable position and failing. Eventually he settled on holding onto his pillow, but that even didn't quite do the trick. Thankfully he didn't have any nightmares.

Instead of saying any of this to Yugito he merely asked: "Where's Sai?"

"Been up for ages already," was the reply, "All ready to go by the looks of things. He even made his bed here—I kinda messed that up by throwing the pillow at you. Oh well."

"Hn."

"Want me to wake you up again in an hour?" Yugito asked, "I'm going to head off again, but I can come back."

"No. I'll get up myself," Sasuke replied shortly, rolling over on to his side so he was facing the wall.

"Suit yourself," came the voice of the catlike kunoichi; Sasuke could hear her opening the window to crawl out again.

"Don't go crawling into other people's rooms," Sasuke said after her, mumbling it in irritation, "It's creepy."

There was a pause, and then a rather impish reply, "Too late."

"Congratulations to all here present today."

The Hokage's voice rang clearly throughout the spacious room where the nine remaining genin stood. The previous two proctors of the exam stood on her right, along with a number of jounin on her left. As for the genin, they stood in three rows of three, the team leaders standing at the beginning of each row, which meant that Uchiha was standing in the front row. Nii Yugito was next. And then Sai quietly brought up the rear. Not that he minded being in the back—it would mean that there wouldn't be so much attention drawn when he announced his withdrawal from the Exam.

"As you know, your teams have each managed to collect the gold scrolls that were mingled within the rest, thus proving your worth to

continue on to the next and final part of the exam," the Hokage stated with clarity, and Sai took it upon himself to study her social actions from a leader's standpoint, "Some of you, I am not surprised to see here—" Sai noticed that she looked at their team at this, "—while some of you have shown hidden talents—" she turned her eyes to the team to their right "—either way, you have met the requirements."

Sai glanced at the team to their right—the team that was led the Sandaime Hokage's grandson, and his two teammates. The third and final team was the team that they had taken their gold scroll from, evidentially having managed to find another team that had one in their possession. Sai wondered with mild interest about the boy's divining technique.

"The next and final part of the exam is done in tournament style—we will have a computer randomly generate whom your opponents will be, and then it begins. Now, understand that the point of this part of the exam is not to win the tournament—quite the opposite. You could lose your first match and still end up being a Chuunin, because everything depends on your performance. Of course winning the match means you can continue to show off your skill, but do not be discouraged if you lose," the Hokage continued, but Sai wasn't really paying much attention to the words, more to the posture of the older woman.

She was standing with her back straight, and speaking with a decisive kind of tone—full of conviction. Sai tried to mimic the posture, wondering what kind of affects this type of posture had on the receiver of a conversation. He looked at the others around him, most of them were standing rigidly and attentive, but the boy who was the Third Hokage's grandson was standing a little differently. He had his hands bunched up into fists and he was staring at the Fifth Hokage with such attentiveness that it looked like he was trying to see a physical embodiment of each word. His jaw was set in a strange sort of manner that made his mouth into a hard line, making him look...he believed the expression was called 'impatient'.

The Hokage's voice continued on, "You will all have about a month to prepare for this event, and the tournament officially begins on the ninth of February. So I suggest that after you're dismissed that you all examine your possible opponents so you are well prepared for the time when you must fight them."

Sai was still paying attention to the boy's posture. He wondered what was going through the boy's head that made him stand like that in reaction to the Hokage's words. Perhaps adapting his own posture to match that of the boy's would help him understand why he was standing the way he was. Sai squinted his eyes at the boy and then adjusted his footwork—feet shoulder-width apart, knees slightly bent, like he was ready to vault out the door in an instant. The boy was slightly hunched over, so Sai slightly hunched his back as well, and set his shoulders forwards, too. He made his hands into fists and inclined the angle of his chin just a little.

Next was the face—the boy's eyebrows were knitted together in a concentrated manner over his eyes, and he was breathing a little heavier through his nose. Sai lowered his eyebrows, though he wasn't sure if he had it exactly right—it was hard to tell without a mirror. Next he also adjusted his lips to stretch over his face in the same determined line, hoping that he was getting it close. Next he stared at the Hokage like he was waiting for her to say something specific, like the key words someone uttered to a dog before they tore off at their master's bidding.

The Hokage continued to talk, her eyes wandering over the crowd, her voice still clear, though Sai wasn't quite sure what this posture was supposed to achieve. Perhaps it was his lack of emotion that made him unable to discover what the Konohamaru boy was feeling, though Sai was certain he could recognize most emotions without having to feel them himself. A couple of times the Hokage glanced at him, and both times she gave him a very strange look and inwardly, Sai wondered if his expression was completely off.

"The Third Part of the Exam will be overseen by—" the Hokage cut off abruptly and gave Sai a sharp look, "Sai, are you feeling well?"

Aware that this would undoubtedly draw attention to himself, he lapsed into his normal posture before eyes could rest on him. Or at least most eyes—Uchiha and Yugito managed to get a glance before he lapsed into a normal position.

"No, Hokage-sama," he said trying once again to get the smile to fix itself on his face in the proper way, "I am feeling quite well."

"I see," she answered, still looking at him strangely before picking up where she left off, "As I was saying, the Third Part of the Exam will be overseen by this gentleman on my right."

The proctor waved to the crowd, and drew the attention back to the front, and Sai quietly decided that this was not the kind of social event in which to be mimicking others. Yet the grandson of the third Hokage didn't get any strange looks—perhaps because he knew what he was feeling, and Sai could not mimic that.

"Now, before we wrap things up for today," the Hokage said, with a certain tone of finality in her voice. Sai noted that that a few of the genin present looked relieved and a little restless—he couldn't fathom why, "I would like to present to you the opportunity to withdraw from the Exam of your own volition. If you do not speak now, you will be unable to withdraw, and short of disqualification, you will not be permitted to leave the Exam."

Sai had prepared for this moment. This was the last thing he had to do for this mission, and he had planned for it. He had researched in the library, and borrowed a number of books on social interactions, particularly those that discussed explaining why it was not possible to fulfill the request of another. He had also borrowed some books on acting, and felt that he was quite suitably ready.

He left a dramatic pause hanging in the air and then he prepared his voice.

"Hokage-sama," his voice came out timid and ashamed—perfect as far as he could tell. He painted the look of remorse on his face, as

studied, trying to mix it with fear and a little sadness. He soon had all eyes of the room on him again, and he hung his head dejectedly, as if it were a cue.

"What is it, Sai?" the Hokage asked.

"I do not feel that I am fit for continuing onwards into the final part of the Exam," he said with a polite air, but in the same ashamed tone as before, "With your permission, I would like to withdraw."

There were a couple of murmurs from the other teams, and he saw Sasuke and Yugito looking at him. Yugito's face was one of surprise and disappointment, but Sai could not read the expression on Sasuke's face. It was as expertly masked as Sai had his.

"Sai, why?" Yugito asked, sounding mildly put off, "You'd do great. After all, nobody else can summon ink monsters."

Even though she had told him not to, he tried to smile at her, "I am sorry, Yugito-san, but the prospect of being unable to withdraw frightens me terribly."

"Could have fooled me," she said with a scoff, and he frowned a little. He seemed to have upset her, and he didn't know why.

"You are upset with me," he said.

"No," she replied with a roll of her eyes, "I think you're being stupid; you have a better chance than I do."

"I am flattered you think so," he replied, though honestly he had no idea what flattery felt like, "But I will stay in my course of action."

"Sasuke, talk some sense into him," Yugito said, turning towards Uchiha.

Sai did not break gaze with him as Sasuke studied him before he finally said, "Do what you want. If you want to withdraw, that's your choice."

Sai gave Sasuke one of his best smiles—he hoped, "Thank you, Uchiha-san for understanding. It has been a pleasure fighting side-by-side with you, and maybe we will do the same once again in the future when you are Chuunin."

He had prepared for this moment as well. The books he had borrowed had said that when saying goodbye to people you were unlikely to see again, it was polite to encourage the hopes that they would. It was also good to compliment them and say something along the lines of having had fun. He also knew it was polite to wish one good health.

He turned to Yugito, "And Yugito-san must take care of herself as well. If you experience any further problems with your menstruation cycle, you must see a medic about it. They will help you if the problem persists."

She kicked his shins, and he almost yelped—more out of surprise than pain. He looked at her, bewildered; hadn't his voice sounded concerned enough? He also couldn't understand why her face, along with most of the other female genin, was getting very red. The male genin—Sasuke aside—all looked rather confused. Mitarashi Anko looked like she was trying not to laugh, along with some of the other adults present.

"I told you, it wasn't that," Yugito answered with clenched teeth, "Like you'd know anyways what it's like."

Sai then recognized she was embarrassed—of course, Sai being Sai, misinterpreted this further.

"Yugito-san, you should not be ashamed of your problem," he tried to amend, "I am certain that many women also suffer from this ailment—"

"Shut up before I break your nose," Yugito growled.

"But I am merely concerned for your health—" he tried again, determined to resolve the social issue before leaving. He wasn't sure

where he had made an error, but he was certain he could fix it.

The Hokage cleared her throat, "I hate to interrupt your...intimate farewells—I understand that the three of you have become very... close over the past few days—but we must move on. Sai, please follow Anko, she will return you to Konoha."

There were a few titters among the female genin, and Yugito's face was redder than ever. He looked at Sasuke for some sort of clue but the Uchiha looked like he wanted nothing more than to slap his own forehead with his hand, and roll his eyes. Still feeling confused, Sai decided to skip to the final part of the social rituals.

"Goodbye, Yugito-san," he said, and then he took her by the shoulders, leaning in.

"What are you doing?" Yugito asked, squirming away.

"I was going to kiss your cheeks," Sai replied, surprised at her reaction.

"Like hell you are!" she replied, incredulous.

"But is that not a parting gesture?" he asked, utterly confused by this point.

"Maybe to someone you've gotten intimately acquainted with—"

"Are we not intimately acquainted?" he asked.

"Not enough!" she replied irritably, "Go, Sai, just go. I liked it better when you didn't say anything."

Sai gave her a final mystified look, before moving onto Sasuke. He was certain everything was as the social system dictated, but according to Yugito, he was not intimately acquainted enough to kiss her on the cheeks. The book hadn't mentioned how intimate the relationship had to be—he would have to research further. But then

the Hokage said they *had* become intimately acquainted over the past few days. Sai was confused.

He held out his hand to Sasuke, hoping he wasn't making another social blunder, but he was relieved when Sasuke clasped his hand and shook it firmly. Sai was unaware of how relieved Sasuke was that Sai hadn't tried to kiss *him* .

"Goodbye, Uchiha-san," Sai said politely.

"...You can call me Sasuke," he replied, after a moment's hesitation.

Sai felt like he had climbed a rung in the ladder of social hierarchy, "Does that mean our friendship has strengthened?"

It was Yugito who answered, "Unless you try to kiss him, too."

Sai dropped Sasuke's hand then, and turned towards Mitarashi Anko. It was fifteen minutes later, as he followed her down the hall, that he was still basking in the (partial) success of his first attempt at bidding someone goodbye. Though Yugito's final comment had confused him a little.

Maybe he *should* have tried to kiss Sasuke on the cheek.

...He would have to research it when he got back.

Sasuke and Yugito were the ones who brought up the rear of the group traveling through the tunnels, the both of them dead silent. Ahead was the proctor, Genma, followed by the group of nattering genin, led by Konohamaru. And then there was what remained of Sasuke's team.

Sasuke just wanted out of the tunnel, out of the Forest, and to be with Sakura again. He was tired of children, and tired of not having anyone to talk to. Well, he didn't talk much anyways, but unlike how his teammates talked, Sakura talked about the simple things, talked

cheerfully. He liked how she talked to him, even if he didn't say too much in return. There had been mostly silence to listen to when he was with Sai and Yugito, and the whining of children was everywhere else. But he wasn't sure he wanted to talk to them anyways, both children and teammates alike. Especially since he figured out Sai was—

"It was weird, how Sai left," Yugito said, breaking the silence between them, "I don't get why he did it. I mean—he was so good."

"He was too good," Sasuke replied darkly; he had liked Sai well enough, but—

"What do you mean?"

"He wasn't genin," Sasuke answered, confident that none of the genin were listening—they were too absorbed in their achievements, "He was a member of ANBU."

"ANBU? Like the Ansatsu Senjustu Tokushu Butai, ANBU?" Yugito said with disbelief, "They sent someone from the Elite Assassin and Tactical Force into the Exam? How do you know?"

"I saw the tattoo," he replied. In fact, he was certain that he wasn't supposed to see it, but he had anyways. Sai had been changing his shirt when they were sharing a room in the Tower, and Sasuke had caught sight of the tattoo on the young man's shoulder in the reflection of the window. The instant he saw the tattoo, he wasn't surprised. A lot of things about Sai made more sense. Like how his talents were so advanced yet he never used them unless ordered to by Sasuke or Yugito. He wasn't supposed to interfere and rig the chances for the other genin. It also explained how he knew so much about the Chuunin Exam—and to be on ANBU at such a young age, Sasuke knew that the two survivors of Sai's Chuunin testing probably included the artistic ninja. Reflecting on things now, he should have been expecting no less from the Councilors.

"Why would they put an ANBU in the Chuunin Exam, though?" Yugito asked, looking dark and angry.

Sasuke was silent for a moment. He knew it was too late to revert to silence. He had brought Sai out into the open, and at the same time, put himself in a position where he had to answer. He didn't want Yugito to know about his criminal status, but if he didn't tell her why, she was going to assume that Sai was put on the team to keep an eye on her because she was a Jinchuuriki. At this point he wished he had just kept his mouth shut.

"To keep an eye on me," Sasuke answered in a low voice.

Yugito stared at him, but he refused to look back at her. He was very conscious of the scratch mark on his forehead protector; he also felt that now everyone was listening. Of course they weren't and the chatter around them hadn't changed, but he was very concerned about how good people's hearing was.

"Why?" Yugito asked, "I know it's probably none of my business, but I've told you a lot more about me than I'm comfortable with. Especially since we've only known each other for three days. So I'm asking, even though I know you don't want me to."

She had a point—but he didn't want to answer, really. He lowered his voice lower still—Yugito had ears like a cat, for obvious reasons.

"I betrayed this village," he muttered, "They still don't trust me."

Now Yugito was staring blatantly at his forehead. He wanted to put her right by saying the scratch was from something else, but he also didn't want to go into detail about it.

"Huh," she said after a while, looking away, "Revenge, was it?"

He didn't say anything further.

"Sucks, doesn't it—not having the people in your village trust you. But you're lucky to at least have friends who believe in you," she said wryly, but a twisted sort of smile was on her face.

He was silent still. He hadn't really thought of that. He knew Sakura and Naruto cared about him, but he didn't know where he would be without them. He probably would have tried to leave, though in his blind state he wouldn't have made it far, and then he also would have bid goodbye to any chances of being forgiven. He would probably be in an ANBU cell now—or dead. But he couldn't shake the feeling that even though he had all this, he needed to protect it from Itachi. But he knew that extracting revenge would jeopardize all he had now.

He rubbed his temples idly; he just didn't know what to *do* . He didn't know if word had gotten out about him to Orochimaru, or if that even mattered. So what if he survived? As far as everyone in Oto was concerned, he was sightless and therefore useless. But Itachi knew he was alive, knew he had bonds again. Itachi had seen Naruto—and wanted him for his Bijuu—and had seen Sakura—who had shown that she cared for Sasuke. Everything was uncertain. Whatever had caused Itachi to kill the clan in the first place was lost on him, but Sasuke had a suspicion that in order to provoke him to grow stronger still, Itachi would kill everyone close to him in Konoha, without hesitation.

But his mother had said let it be. And just thinking of that brought him back where he started. To kill Itachi, or not to kill Itachi? He was quite relieved when he sensed Sakura's chakra signature come into range, and then a few minutes later, the group came to the entrance of the tunnel. He could shelve his dark thoughts for the time being. As the group trudged through the thinning forest and towards the gate entrance, Sasuke started looking ahead, trying to spot a certain cherry-blossom-hued head.

They all came to a chain link fence, and Genma took out a key to open the lock. There was a group of people waiting on the other side of the fence, and Sasuke could see them over the heads of the

young genin. But he recognized a few without having to see them. He recognized instantly Sakura, of course, who was accompanied by Kakashi and Naruto. There was also a Takigakure jounin, a Kumogakure jounin, and a Konohagakure jounin, who Sasuke recognized vaguely as the leader of the Konohamaru-kid's team. As soon as the gates were open, the younger of the genin rushed through, heading to their respective leaders, milling past Genma like a sea of ants.

Sakura was the first one to do the opposite. Pushing past the children, she made her way across the distance between her and Sasuke, Naruto and Kakashi following in her wake. Sasuke felt a soft smirk pull at the corner of his mouth. In the mid-afternoon light, the way the sunlight filtered through the clouds caught Sakura's hair in a certain way that made her look older—more mature—and he felt like warmth was radiating off of her. He basked in that warmth while he waited, and for a moment it seemed like he could see every movement in slow motion, see every detail clearly.

Yugito looked at Sakura and then glanced at him, "Girlfriend?"

The words 'something like that' drifted across his mind for an instant, but they were erased before they had a chance to register—he never knew the thought had even existed.

"She's my teammate."

"She's not the one like me, right?" Yugito asked.

"No, the other one is," Sasuke answered, gesturing with his chin.

Yugito nodded once slowly, "Okay.... I'm going to report to my sensei, but sit tight. I want to talk to your other teammate."

Sasuke gave a nod as Yugito stalked off towards the Kumogakure jounin standing with his arms crossed. She glanced at Sakura for an instant of curiosity as the two of them passed each other, but Sakura hadn't noticed. And then Sasuke caught Sakura in her embrace ash

she made it to him, Naruto right behind her. He was surprised though, when Sakura suddenly let go of him and took a step back. He looked at her, puzzled, but she only laughed at his look.

"Not doing that again," she said giggling, her eyes bright and shining, "You smell terrible, Sasuke."

"There weren't any showers in the tower," Sasuke reminded her, remembering how she lamented back when they were all genin.

"I think everyone in a ten-foot radius can tell, teme," Naruto said, standing next to Sakura. Kakashi, meanwhile, had been pulled aside by Genma and was talking to him in earnest.

"You know what 'radius' means, dobe?" Sasuke retorted, making a jibe back.

"Yes, in fact I do," Naruto said with defiance, "Why? Do you need me to define it for you?"

"Fighting already, are you?" came the lazy voice of Kakashi from behind Naruto. Naruto who hadn't seen, and couldn't sense, Kakashi's approach, jumped in surprise.

"It was just stopping," Sakura said pointedly, looking at both Naruto and Sasuke.

"Congratulations on passing the second part of the Exam, Sasuke," Kakashi said once Naruto and Sasuke were done glaring at each other, the crow's foot at the corner of his visible eye crinkling a bit, "Nothing less expected of course, though you seem to be causing quite the stir among the proctors."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Naruto asked.

"Genma was just telling me something about opening the scroll and summoning Anko in the middle of her evening coffee," Kakashi said, sounding vaguely amused by this.

"They will expect results like that if they put people who are more advanced than genin in the Exam," Sasuke answered; it was a comment not only about himself, but also about Sai, who had been in ANBU. Yugito, too, had demonstrated skills outside that of a genin.

Kakashi shook his head, "I think you're not giving yourself enough credit—you are doing things that even jounin would have a difficult time doing."

Sasuke didn't really care about that, he had been way above average most of his life, and this was nothing new to him—he cared more about the tediousness of the Exam. Of course he doubted Kakashi would hold sway over this, but he couldn't help but feel a little irritated anyways.

"Dammit, teme," Naruto said grumpily, "Don't let it go to your head, it doesn't mean you'll be better than me."

"You keep telling yourself that, dobe," Sasuke said, rolling his eyes, "Now stop being an idiot, there's someone who wants to meet you."

"What? Who?" Naruto asked a confused frown descending upon his face; Kakashi and Sakura also were looking curiously at him.

Sasuke nodded to Yugito who was shyly approaching them from behind. She looked rather nervous, which was a change for her, Sasuke noted. The first time he had seen her, she was blunt and to the point. Perhaps it was the idea of meeting another Jinchuuriki, and she wanted to be liked, or maybe it was the fact she would have to talk about her demon that made her agitated. Either way, she couldn't meet any of the members of Team Seven in the eye when they turned to look at her. She kinda looked off to the side while rubbing her arm nervously.

"Erm, hi," she said awkwardly, her greenish eyes flickering once at Sasuke imploringly for an instant.

"This is the kunoichi who was on my team in the forest: Nii Yugito," Sasuke said, and then let Sakura take over the introductions.

"Hi, I'm Haruno Sakura," the said pink-haired kunoichi said, as if on cue, "Pleased to meet you, Yugito-san."

"And this dobe is Uzumaki Naruto," Sasuke said, indicating to Naruto.

Naruto punched Sasuke in the shoulder, and then backed away hurriedly. Sasuke glowered inwardly—did he really smell that bad?

"Uzumaki, huh?" Yugito said slowly, finally daring to look at any of them, she studied Naruto for a moment, her eyes lingering on the whisker-like markings on Naruto's face, "I was hoping to talk to you—alone, if that's okay with you."

"Uhh, sure," Naruto said, looking confused about the request, not awkward.

Sasuke had enough sense to know that he should probably draw Sakura and Kakashi's attention away from Yugito, who was looking more and more nervous under their gazes. He turned to the other two.

"Come on," he said to Sakura, offering his arm to her automatically.

"Nuh-uh," she said stepping away from his offered arm, "Not until you've showered."

Disgruntled, Sasuke gave a grunt and shoved his hands in his pockets. It was fair enough, but he had imagined a different kind of greeting in his head. One in which nobody mentioned how badly he smelled. Then looked at Kakashi, suddenly remembering something that Yugito had told him earlier that morning. He gave his teacher a disapproving look.

"What did I do?" Kakashi asked, a look of surprise on his face as Sasuke looked sourly at him.

"I hold you responsible for Anko's current preference in reading material."

And with that, Sasuke turned and headed in the general direction of his home, determined to come out smelling better than a field of flowers.

The ink brush dipped down into the inkwell and then slowly moved across the page. Nariko held her tongue between her teeth as she swept the brush across the parchment, bringing one stroke across her page to the right. Then, without dipping the brush again, she drew another line from near the beginning of the first and swept it down at an angle to the left. She dipped the brush again and wiped it on the edge of the well before continuing. Midway through the newest line, she drew another line directly downwards. From the same starting point she drew another line to the left, and then turned it sharply down. From the bottom of the downward line and the bottom of the bent line, she drew a final stroke. On her page she had now a near-perfect: —the kanji for stone.

She looked over at Itachi who was studying her intently as she wrote. She held it up proudly to him, and he nodded slowly at her. The ink ran a little from the still-wet ink. She made a sad sort of face at the ink trail.

"Oops," she muttered, and looked at Itachi nervously, hoping he wouldn't be angry.

"You should wait until the ink dries," he told her, and she gave a quick nod and hurried glued her eyes to the page, "Now, write the hiragana reading for that kanji."

Nariko bit her lip in thought. She knew the word...now the hiragana that would make up that word... She dipped her ink in the inkwell

again, and wrote two small letters in three short strokes. She blew on the ink to make it dry quicker and then held it up to Itachi again. He nodded at her and she felt relieved.

"Very good," he told her as she put the paper back down on the table, "You are doing very well. But we will stop for today."

Nariko felt her face fall—she didn't want to stop learning yet. This was one of the few things that she could actually enjoy doing in Amegakure. The endless torrents of rain outside made it almost impossible to go out, and she felt so trapped in the dank corridors—they reminded her too much of the hole in the room where she had been imprisoned most of her life. What she found even more tiring was that Itachi was now almost always with her—before she wouldn't have minded that, but ever since she had learned what would happen to her from Haruno, his constant presence made her nervous.

Things hadn't really changed after she found out what happened to the host to the Shichibi. Nothing had happened outwardly at least. Flower-chan and Itachi were still nice to her, all the other members still treated her the same, and she was no less frightened of Deidara. In fact, if she had not seen the contorted body of the Shichibi so vividly in her mind every time she shut her eyes, she would have begun question whether she had imagined it or not. But the image *had* remained, and even though she was hardly being treated any different than before she felt increasingly nervous around those who she still mostly trusted. She spent most of her days on edge.

The demon had started talking to her in her sleep again as a result of her nerves, giving her dreams of terrifying things. It particularly liked to remind her of the tortured form of the Shichibi's host and kept replaying her promise of setting it free in her mind, over and over. It showed her images that terrified her of the things that it would do once she had set it free: an Amegakure destroyed and ruined, people lying dead everywhere; depictions of Flower-chan lying on the ground with her stomach torn open and the rain washing her blood down the streets; images of Itachi impaled on different bits of

pipe were some of the demon's favourites to show Nariko. She'd often wake up with a jolt and then hurriedly bite her knuckles until they bled to keep herself from screaming. The demon would cackle in her head as she let the tears slide over her face.

She was so afraid that Itachi would find out she knew the truth that she made sure never to wake him, no matter how upset she was. If he asked about her knuckles, she would tell him she scraped them. This excuse was also a very plausible one. It was only after she knew the truth about her fate that she started lying consistently. She did not want the leader to become aware of her again and she was always afraid that he would remember her and take her demon from her. She did want to be rid of her demon, but she did not want to be rid of it in such a painful way. She did not know what she hoped to accomplish by telling the demon she would set it free, because she knew that it would kill her too. But she found herself trying to buy herself more time.

She had been aware that the only reason they had not taken the demon from her earlier was that her body was in a weakened condition. She had begun to try and find ways to weaken her body so they had to further delay taking the demon. The first thing she had done was to jump off the wagon while they traveled to Amegakure, and keep them from taking it right away when they arrived. The experience of broken bones was extremely painful, and she did not want to repeat the incident again, so she found other ways of injuring herself. She had cut herself badly on a nail, and apparently that could have turned out worse than she had intended, because Itachi had taken her to a hospital. She also had deliberately slipped and injured herself on various things. She actually managed to sprain her ankle once. Each time the demon healed her injuries, but she knew it was upset with her for it knew her true intentions. She ignored it as best she could.

Each time she was injured, Itachi seemed to stay by her side even more determinedly, making it difficult for her to make a lot of things look like accidents, and it made her agitated for many reasons.

Mostly that she was afraid that he would find out she knew, and afraid that they would discover she was hurting herself on purpose. It wasn't very often that she was away from him, and when she was alone, there were very few things she could do. Going outside was always something Nariko hated doing, because she knew that somehow the Leader was causing the rain, and to go outside would only mean he could discover her again. She still entertained herself with origami, but that was beginning to get tedious. Sometimes she wandered the halls and looked out windows, but the view was always the same, and Itachi was always somewhere close by.

Learning how to read was one of the few things she could totally immerse herself in and completely forget about all the worries and agitations she felt. She could forget for a little while that Itachi and Flower-chan were going to help the others kill her and accept Itachi's tutoring as a kind gesture. She still couldn't understand why he was teaching her to read, but she eagerly learned anyways. Itachi seemed impressed with her progress and that always made her feel happy. But when the teaching sessions were over, she sunk down into the agitated state again and was scared of what to do.

"Do we have to stop now, Itachi-sama?" she asked, her voice saddened and almost pleading.

"I have some work to do now," he told her in response.

"Can I have something to read then?" she asked pleadingly. She had never asked this before, but as she asked it now, she didn't understand why she had never done so before. She had been learning to read and write yet she had never actually sat down and *read* something. Itachi looked a little surprised by her request, and she hoped she hadn't asked too much.

"I do not have any books for you to read," he answered slowly.

"Oh, okay," she murmured in reply, looking away. She could feel him still looking at her, and she wished he wouldn't. It was beginning to make her nervous again.

"I might have something...I do not know if I still have it," Itachi said after a moment of keeping her under his firm gaze.

She watched him carefully from behind her strands of long hair—Flower-chan had insisted on having it cut a couple of months back, but it was getting long again and her hair kept falling in her eyes. Nariko preferred it that way, because then she could watch people without being noticed as easily. She observed as Itachi stood and walked back into his room. A few minutes later he emerged; in his hand he was holding a thing, dusty-looking book. She peered up at him shyly as he held it out to her. She clumsily scrambled to her feet and graciously took it from his offering hand. She peered at the front cover, which was plain, and a sort of gentian blue. On the spine there was a title written entirely in kanji that she was unable to read.

"This is a book that I took with me from my home," Itachi told her, "It is very important that you speak of it to no one and that it never leave this room."

She squeaked in surprise. She had not expected Itachi to let her read something so personal. It had been Flower-chan who had taught her the importance of not meddling in other people's personal belongings. That had been during the time when Flower-chan was taking care of her; Nariko had curiously looked through the desk drawers in the room. She had found a very old photograph of three children and an older man. Nariko had not known at the time, but the man in the photograph would also be the writer she asked Deidara about a few weeks later—though she had not recognized him because the photo was so old.

The other people Nariko didn't recognize, other than a young girl with blue hair—a younger Flower-chan. The boy next to her looked so similar to her that Nariko had absently wondered if he had been her brother. The other boy had spiky red hair and looked frighteningly like a younger version of the leader. Later Nariko had asked Flower-chan about the photo. Flower-chan had looked very angry, but calmly—yet sternly—explained respect, privacy, and

personal belongings to Nariko, and also given instructions that she must not mention it again.

So when Itachi handed her a book that he had brought from his old home, she understood the importance of it. She held the book close to her chest and bowed low. When she straightened up, Itachi's eyebrows were slightly raised.

"Thank you so much, Itachi-sama, for letting me read this very important book!" she squeaked.

He nodded at her and she scampered back to her corner where she usually sat, holding the book delicately in her hands, smiling to herself.

"Some of the kanji you will not know, but the corresponding hiragana is written next to them," he told her, "I must go out, and I was going to take you with me. But if you promise to stay here, and not go anywhere else, I will let you read it now."

"I promise, Itachi-sama," she said earnestly, too excited about the book to worry about all her troubles, how she shouldn't trust Itachi and that Akatsuki was lying to her.

He gave another slow nod and went to the door. He hadn't even closed it all the way before she had opened the book and buried her nose in it.

She read it through twice—it wasn't that long—and started going through it a third time by flipping to random pages and rereading segments off of those pages. When Itachi came back, she was just rereading the ending involving the reunion of a family that had been separated by a misfortunate event. She looked up from where she had been lying on the floor and sat up rather hurriedly on first sight of Itachi, bouncing eagerly up and down.

"How did you like it?" Itachi asked, seating himself at his desk, putting a few loose sheets on its tabletop.

"I could read it, though I can't read all that fast...but I could still read it!" she told him excitedly, "I didn't know all the kanji like you said, but I could read the hiragana. I really liked the story too! About how it was about a family who—"

"I know the story," he interrupted politely.

"I thought it was really good," Nariko continued, now being spared having to tell him the story, "I wish I had a family like that. One that could stay together even though bad things happened to them."

Itachi said nothing but nodded absently, like he was thinking hard about something else. But Nariko didn't notice.

"And I wanted to ask you something, Itachi-sama," Nariko said suddenly, flipping open the book to the inside front cover. She held it up to Itachi who broke out of his trance when he found a book in his face, "Who's Uchiha Sasuke?"

Itachi blinked slowly at her, "Pardon?"

"I said: who's Uchiha Sasuke?" she asked again.

Itachi didn't answer right away, and Nariko began to wonder if she'd said something wrong. She knew who Uchiha Sasuke was, of course—Haruno had told who he was, he was Itachi's brother. But for so long she had wanted to ask Itachi about his family, and even though she was still becoming accustomed to lying, she would pretend she didn't know who it was. It was a personal question, but she wanted so desperately to hear Itachi talk about his family.

"He is my brother," Itachi answered after a bit, "Uchiha Sasuke is my brother. The book used to be his."

"A brother?" she asked slowly, she knew she had to be careful, or Itachi would get angry with her, "I heard you tell Tobi about your brother. I didn't know you had one until then. What is he like? Is he older or younger than you?"

Itachi studied her and she quickly looked away under his gaze, wondering if she had said too much.

"He is younger," Itachi answered then, "It has been some time since I had seen him. By chance met him again."

Nariko was captivated now, but there was something more she had to know, "Was he happy to see you again, Itachi-sama? You've lived with Akatsuki for a long time, that I'm sure he missed you."

She knew that Haruno said that Itachi's brother wanted to kill him, but she was just desperate to hear something, anything that was different from what Haruno had told her.

A small smile came on Itachi's face as he stared off into space, but it was not the kind of smile Nariko had been expecting, "He wasn't happy to see me; in fact I believe our chance encounter upset him. You see, Nariko, not all families are happy. My brother hates me and wants to kill me."

Nariko's heart sunk. Haruno had been right, it seemed, and it tore her heart. She probably shouldn't have been surprised, after all, he had been right about them lying to her, why should this be any different? If they were going to kill her, Itachi's brother hating him didn't seem to go against Akatsuki's typical profile.

"What about the rest of your family?" she asked then, "They can't hate you, too! Itachi-sama is a kind and caring person, surely you can't be hated by the rest of your family!"

She inwardly prayed that Haruno had been lying about Itachi's family. Everything else she would accept as truth, but she couldn't believe what he had said about Itachi killing his family. He had shown her kindness, even if she was going to die. It was because she felt that parts of that kindness shown to her was genuine, and it had to come from somewhere inside Itachi.

"I was admired by my entire clan, and my parents loved me and were very proud of me, up until they died," Itachi said quietly, and Nariko couldn't hear any emotion in his voice, "Know this, Nariko, that I have no family. My brother will not acknowledge me as kin, and the rest are dead. I cannot have the story's ending for myself."

"How did they die?" Nariko asked in a whisper, scarcely daring to breathe.

"They were killed by a young man who did a horrible thing when faced with a terrible decision," Itachi answered, his voice a little icy, but Nariko did not think it was directed at her, "Whether he made the right choice, I still cannot say."

Nariko was confused. By the sounds of it, Haruno and Itachi's stories matched, except Itachi hadn't said that the person who killed his family had been him. She didn't know what to think, or even if she should ask if it was him. Itachi had lied to her before, so what if he was lying now? He had lied to her about caring about her, so could he have lied to his family too? Convinced them he loved them and then killed them like he would kill her?

"Do you hate the young man who killed your family?" she asked timidly.

"Yes. I will never be able to forgive him," Itachi answered, "Even long after he is dead."

No, Nariko thought to herself, he had cared about his family, but she also knew that he had also been the one to kill them. He hadn't said it, but she could tell, just from the tone of his voice. Yet instead of being shocked and terrified, she felt incredibly sad. Tears welled up in her eyes.

"It's okay, Itachi-sama!" she exclaimed chokingly, "You don't need your brother or your old family, right?"

For the first time since she had begun her subtle interrogation, Itachi looked her in the eye. She didn't look away; she held his red eyes steady through her tears.

"Because we're family, right? You, me, and Flower-chan, and maybe Deidara-sama too, sort of. But we're your family now," she said fiercely through her tears, "Okay, Itachi-sama? Itachi...niisan?"

The look he gave her was one Nariko did not have the words to describe; he looked shocked and surprised but in a muted way, suggesting that he had not expected her outburst or the emotion put in her words. She still held his gaze, determination painted on her face. She didn't care if he was going to help kill her, because he was family, and she would rather die losing the demon to someone she loved and cared about than to a stranger, somewhere far away from Itachi. Instead of killing her, she thought of it now as helping *free* her, help her be rid of something she hated. She would die free of the demon, die...purified.

Itachi slowly reached over and put his hand on her head, like he had the very first time they met, closing his eyes, "Alright."

A/N: What is it with cats and crawling in spaces where they shouldn't be exploring? That's why I wouldn't put it past Yugito to go crawling through people's windows shamelessly. And that's also how she found out that Anko was reading Icha Icha. XD I was kinda sad that I wouldn't be writing in Sai's perspective again for a long time, but I thought, to hell with it, and did anyways. I like writing from Sai's perspective, it's fun AND funny. Ho ho!

Chapter 57

A/N: To Correction Inc.: Whoops, I knew that. My bad. Thanks for bringing it to my attention.

To everyone who asked: Yes, updating schedule shall resume as normal: every second Wednesday.

I have a request for everyone: I know that there are frequently spelling and grammar mistakes in my chapters, but because I was the one who wrote the chapter, I know how the sentence is supposed to go, and my brain omits the mistake. So I usually miss them. I would love it if people could bring these mistakes to my attention. All you have to do is copy and paste the **whole** sentence. And then in another sentence, tell me the error, if it isn't obvious. It's easier to find on my hard copy if I have the whole sentence. Thanks so much for making Blind a better read! (bows low)

Chapter Fifty-Seven: Bright Candy Colours

The morning after Sasuke returned from the Forest of Death, he slept long. For the first time in three days he'd been able to sleep in his own bed again, with the comfort of Sakura next to him, and not being rudely awoken by bits of flying bedding. It was well beyond noon when he finally awoke, and he was alone in the house, though Sakura's familiar signature could be found in the location of the back yard. The Ten Ten girl was with her, and it seemed they were sparing, from what he could tell.

He hauled himself out of bed, and dragged himself to the bathroom. After he left the bathroom he made his way to the kitchen and was surprised to find Sakura had left out some breakfast for him. There was an accompanying note that read:

Hey sleepy head,

Made you something to eat while I go out and train with Ten Ten in the back yard (as if you couldn't tell already). Bug us when you're up.

Sakura

He grabbed the tray of food she'd set out—she'd done something a little different with a sort of fruit thing and cereal opposed to the usual traditional breakfast—and he grabbed a set of chopsticks and a spoon, too, before heading towards the back door. Sakura and Ten Ten were still sparing and neither of them noticed as he slipped outside and sat down in a sunny patch of the veranda in the cool winter air.

Sakura and Ten Ten were both fighting long range, throwing weapons at one another. The weapons mistress of course was obviously better at it, but Sakura seemed to be holding her own. The brunt of collateral damage from their spar was mostly taking out on the brown lawn, which was littered with an amazing number of weapons, including one that resembled the impractical knife he had to retrieve in the genjutsu mission. It was amazing that rest of the yard was mostly untouched by this, because it was getting so that it would be impossible to stand anywhere.

Sasuke chewed thoughtfully on a mouthful of cereal as he watched. It wasn't often that he got to watch Sakura fight—usually he was either fighting on a team with her, or she was fighting against him, so it was interesting for him to see how she approached her other opponents. She had improved a little over the short time it had been since the mission back in October, and he didn't like how the rest of the team had to put everything on hold until he had cleared the Chuunin Exam. But soon Sakura and Naruto would be able to use their skills in the field again.

Sakura dodged a flurry of shuriken just then, leaping out of the way as they embedded themselves in the grass, one after another.

"You've been practicing hard for the Jounin Exam," Sakura said to Ten Ten, "Neji have a hand in this?"

Ten Ten smiled shyly and easily caught two kunai out of the air that had been aimed at her, "Yeah, we've been spending lots of quality time together."

"How are you guys anyways?" Sakura asked, nimbly dodging the next assault, "You still just friends, or has he extended beyond that?"

"If you're asking if any of our quality time has been of the romantic kind, the answer is no," Ten Ten answered with a pout, whipping out a scroll.

"He's still not expanding on that kiss?" Sakura asked with disapproval, standing in a ready position, waiting to see what Ten Ten was going to do with the scroll.

It was the strangest thing Sasuke had ever seen. The two of them chatting away normally while they were fighting. They were discussing things as normally as they would have if they were sitting at a café. He wondered if this was usual behaviour for girls while they sparred... He had never watched anything of the sort before, and that they still had concentration enough not to get hurt...?

"I'm thinking of suggesting that I take him out for dinner as a thank-you-for-taking-so-much-time-for-me thing," Ten Ten said, unfurling the scroll, "Though I did lose a little quality time when Neji started training with Sasuke too."

"Sorry about that," Sakura laughed, and then pulled an acrobatic sort of leap to avoid a new assault of weapons, "But yeah, the dinner thing sounds like a good idea. Especially if he's kissed you before... he shouldn't refuse, you know?"

"Enough about me, huh?" Ten Ten grinned, launching a volley of new weapons. "Where are things at with you and Sasuke?"

Sasuke's ears perked up at this; it was one of those situations where one wanted to hear the answer and didn't at the same time. He could clear his throat right now and attract their attention to him—and probably create an accident in the process—or listen to Sakura's answer. Curiosity pulled at him, and he wasn't sure what to do. He made a move to clear his throat but Sakura was already answering. He stopped.

"Things have stayed pretty much the same between us, you know?" Sakura replied, but she was evidently a little flustered by the question, as a shuriken grazed her thigh in mid-dodge, "Ouch—but I think we've developed a sort of routine. Recently my dad was making a fuss about me living here. He let it go for some reason, but I can tell neither of my parents want me here anymore—"she dodged another few weapons and threw some of her own into the fray, "—and I can't guess which side my brother will take. Odds are that he'll be with my parents on this one."

Sasuke was glad to hear that Sakura's father had backed down, but the fact that Sakura felt pressured by her brother and her parents still displeased him. He wanted to find some way to prove it to them things were well with them. He'd spent some time with Kanaye, and maybe he could get him to talk to his parents as a favour. But then again, Sasuke didn't want to imagine what Kanaye would pull for an I.O.U., and he didn't like owing people favours. And he could also foresee the question 'why?' And Sasuke didn't know the answer.

"Well, what're you going to do about it?" Ten Ten inquired.

"Stay here until Sasuke decides he wants me out," Sakura replied, trying her luck with throwing needles, "I mean, I really do like living here. The grounds are nice, the house is spacious, yet cozy; the neighbours are friendly enough. And I've gotten used to living here. Honestly, I'll be sad when I go, because right now I'm as happy as I'll ever be."

This news both relieved and agitated Sasuke. The fact she was happy here caused him to feel reassured about what she had told

him earlier, but on the other hand, she still talked like she was expecting him to get rid of her when he tired of her presence. Didn't she know she meant more to him than that?

"Yeah, everything's perfect, except one thing," Ten Ten said, calling the match to a close, "And that is that you haven't gotten the Emperor of the Ice Palace to let you inside."

"I wouldn't say that..." Sakura hesitated, looking absently at the cut on her leg.

"Well, he's not completely thawed out, and I'll tell you why: you haven't been trying to pull any moves on him," Ten Ten declared, hands on her hips, "If you don't take any action you're not going to get a *reaction*. You need to defrost him with that burning Haruno passion of yours, girl."

Normally Sakura was a very headstrong person, but as Sasuke looked at her, she was acting more like Hyuuga Hinata. Her face had gotten red and she was muttering something in protest. Sasuke too felt the back of his neck getting warm. He knew Sakura would never do anything of the sort—she slept next beside him every night and had never tried to breach their trust. During the one time she had almost kissed him, she had decided against it, and nothing had happened since. But the very imagination of Sakura slinking closer to him in bed, her breath hot on his neck as she made to kiss it, her hands resting delicately on his chest, her legs becoming tangled with his, while she whispered his name... He felt the warmth of his neck creep higher until he felt it a little on his cheekbones. He forcibly banished the image. And it was only replaced by memories of a rainy night in October when he and Sakura were trapped in a teahouse, stripped down to their undergarments, nothing but a tablecloth separating them.

Decidedly not helping. Not to mention unacceptable for an Uchiha.

"The girls and I have been talking and we've decided—" Ten Ten began.

Sasuke decided that he did not want to know what Hyuuga Hinata, Ten Ten, and especially Yamanaka Ino had talked about. He cleared his throat loudly then, and both Sakura and Ten Ten looked at him—Sakura jumped in surprise, her face becoming redder still.

"Sakura, I almost think the garden looked better after three years of neglect compared to what it looks like now," he said, trying to avoid mentioning the conversation he'd heard.

Ten Ten gave him a hard look. He stared back at her, trying to push the memory of what she had just been telling Sakura from his mind. It didn't work because Ten Ten being brash and outspoken wasn't affected by his comment and was aware that he had overheard. Instead of pretending he hadn't heard a word, like Sakura and he would have done if Ten Ten had not been there, she turned the fact back at him.

"So you heard us, Uchiha," she said accusingly, "But you know what? I don't care. In fact, I'm glad you heard me. That's right, Uchiha: *glad* . At least you're prepared now for when Sakura does lay the moves on you! And you're going to let her. She's a sexy lady, and don't you deny it!"

Sasuke merely stared at her, amazed that anyone would dare talk to him about this topic in this manner. He was also fighting to stay composed—the heat in his cheekbones had receded, but the redness of his neck had not. Sakura did not seem pleased either by the sudden outburst of her friend, having turned the reddest yet. If she got any redder in the face, she would put Hyuuga Hinata to shame.

"I want you to say it to her," Ten Ten decided suddenly.

"Pardon?" Sasuke asked, inwardly astounded.

"You heard me: tell Sakura she's a sexy lady!"

"Ten Ten, please," Sakura interjected quickly, "It's alright. Let it go okay?"

Ten Ten held her gaze for a moment, and then looked away, "Sorry, that was a bit out of line."

A bit?

"Sorry Sakura," Ten Ten mumbled, taking out her scrolls again, "I think I'll be going now, before I do anything else stupid."

She scribbled something on the scroll, which caused all of her weapons disappear in clouds of smoke, leaving only Sakura's weapons scattered on the lawn. She packed her scrolls away and left, her face burning with embarrassed frustration. Sasuke waited until her chakra signature had left the Uchiha premises before he dared look at Sakura. Her face was still red from embarrassment and now a perfect match to the shade of Hyuuga Hinata. As for him, his neck was still burning. She coughed and gave him a crooked smile.

"Well, this is awkward," she said with a nervous laugh. She glanced at the tray of empty dishes beside him and changed the subject, "How was breakfast?"

"It was good—and different," he replied slowly, quick to accept the topic change, "You didn't have to do that for me. Thank you."

"I make breakfast every second day for you," she said, her smile more relaxed now, "It was my turn and I felt like doing something different."

"Thank you," he said again.

"You're welcome," she replied, "There's something else I did for you while you were gone. Come."

She held out her hand to him, and slowly he rose to his feet and took it, curious about where she might lead him. She tugged him down

onto the lawn and through her scattered weapons, leading him towards the side of the house. When she stopped, he found himself overcome with surprise. Instead of the corner of the house, there was a square indentation where a segment of the house was missing. The new walls and roof were matched with the rest of the house so seamlessly that if he hadn't known that there had been something there before, he wouldn't have been able to tell the difference.

In the patch of new earth that was now revealed, there was now a small flowerbed. A shrub-like tree had been planted, and the earth around it was all upturned—freshly dug.

"I got some renovators to remove Itachi's room—like you wanted," she said quietly, studying him.

He was speechless—in a good way, though. He couldn't believe she had done this for him in the three short days he had been gone. He was impressed and touched—and grateful, all at the same time. He felt Sakura leave his side and kneel down by the flowerbed she had evidently planted.

"It doesn't look like much right now," she was saying "But in the spring it'll look better—I've planted a bunch of perennial bulbs, and in the springtime I'll plant some creeping thyme. The tree is a small maple, so it'll grow leaves in the spring and turn a nice colour in the fall."

He felt that damned indiscernible emotion again, but he liked feeling it even though he hated it because he couldn't identify it. Right now though, he didn't care if he knew what it was, because he was looking at Sakura with such amazement that he was almost tempted to call her a sexy lady like Ten Ten had ordered—except in Uchiha speak. The Uchiha didn't use words like 'sexy'.

He came up behind her and knelt down, putting one arm around her shoulder. With the other arm, he traced the length of her outstretched hand and placed his hand on top of hers. He moved her

hand over the earth with his fingers between hers so he could feel the moist soil; they smoothed the earth together.

"Thank you," he murmured in her ear, truly happy.

By nature, Hinata was a worrier. She had always had this slight paranoia in her personality that made it so she was nervous most of the time. This had definitely been a hindrance in her shinobi training, and with years of practice, she managed to be able to suppress it while in practice of the Shinobi arts. But it had never really gone away. No, if anything, it made her more nervous about everything else because she suppressed it during training and missions.

That was one of the reasons she loved Naruto so much. Not only was he not afraid of anything, he also made her feel safe when she was with him. After she had become his girlfriend, she had felt permanently secure with him. She felt safe whenever she thought about him, even when he wasn't there. He was her prince charming, her knight in shining armor. As long as he was alive, she didn't have to worry.

Until now.

It was yesterday when Hinata had gone out with Neji to run an errand for her father that they happened to pass Ichiraku's Ramen Shop, and that was where she inevitably saw her boyfriend, her prince. Her face had lit up at the sight of him, but then she saw the girl he was sitting next to; he was talking to her in such earnest that it definitely wasn't casual conversation. She had stopped and stood still, reflexively stepping behind a telephone pole and peeking out from behind it. Neji had stopped and looked at her with a raised eyebrow and then he followed her line of vision.

Naruto was still talking to the girl, and she was nodding seriously to what he was saying. She was very pretty, Hinata had noted nervously; with long blonde hair that rivaled Ino's in beauty. She turned her head a little at one point to grab some toppings to season

her ramen and Hinata saw the profile of the girl's face, and got a glimpse of beautiful green eyes.

Neji hadn't moved at all and had been studying Naruto with mild disapproval. They watched until Naruto paid for the ramen and then, at the same time as the girl, got up and left. Both of them were still talking to each other.

Neji had turned to her, "Would you like me to talk to him for you, Hinata-sama?"

She remembered shaking her head, "No, thank you, Neji-niisan. I should deal with this myself."

In retrospect, why had she said that? Now, as she was nervously approaching Naruto's apartment, she wished she had said yes to Neji's offer. It would be so much easier and a lot less stressful. She wrung her hands as she quietly climbed the steps to his second-floor apartment. It was close to six in the morning and relatively dark due to winter daylight hours. She hadn't been able to sleep very well last night.

Maybe she was just a friend. Naruto had other friends who were girls, just like she had other guy friends, like Kiba and Shino. He had been friends with Sakura for many years, and they had never been in some sort of relationship. But that didn't mean Hinata hadn't worried about it almost constantly for months. She was so relieved when Sasuke was brought back to the village, because even though Sakura hadn't talked about him, she knew that Sakura still cared about him. She had always been sensitive when talking about Sasuke. Still, the fact that Sakura *didn't* talk about Sasuke had been a concern for Hinata because of Sakura's friendship status with Naruto.

Hinata stood outside Naruto's doorstep, breaking deeply, poking her fingers together in anxiety. What if Naruto *had* found another girl that he liked better than her? What if he was going to leave her? What if he said he didn't love her and he never wanted to see her face

again? She almost turned and fled the premises right there and then. The only thing that kept her from fleeing was that she had *only* seen him eating ramen with another girl, nothing more. That, and she felt she was too faint to run anyways.

Why did things have to be so hard for her? Why did she have to be so scared? She had been on dates with Naruto, she had trained with him, and he had told her he loved her. She could trust him.

She was hyperventilating now, her breath fast and erratic. With a trembling hand she raised her fist to knock on the door. She knocked a lot harder than she intended, and the echoing booms seemed to thunder in the silent streets. She stood waiting with baited breath, no longer hyperventilating, but she wasn't breathing at all now either.

What was she thinking? Coming here so early in the morning? She hadn't thought of what she was going to say to him! But it was too late now. If she ran, Naruto would see her running away. If she stayed, she was certain she'd have a bout of hysterics. She started hyperventilating again. Her heart rate accelerated as she heard the approaching footsteps, and her mind began scrambling for something, anything, to say.

There was the sliding of the lock and then slowly, the door opened, and there was Naruto, her knight in shining armor, standing in his pajamas, his beaver-hat on his head, looking like he would collapse from sleep-deprivation. But Hinata scarcely noticed; she had to say something to explain her appearance at his door, so she said the first thing that came to her mind.

"I love you, Naruto-kun!" she exclaimed and then threw her arms around him.

Naruto, clearly awakened further by her sudden outburst, almost fell over from surprise. He made an acking sort of noise, but she didn't let go of him.

"Hinata-chan!" he exclaimed in surprise, "I love you too, but what's going on? What's the matter?"

She didn't know what to say. She knew why she was here, but she couldn't find the words to describe it, to answer him. She couldn't think of any words; if her brain could be attached to a heart monitor, it would be flat-lining. She attempted to say something, even she wasn't sure what, but it only came out as an incoherent mumble.

"What was that?" Naruto asked her, but she only shook her head.

There was more silence, and he put his arms around her reassuringly. She felt safer when he did that, but she was still worried.

"Hey, why don't you come inside and I'll make you some instant ramen?" he suggested quietly.

Slowly, she nodded, and loosened her grip a little on him so they could walk inside. A few minutes later, she found herself seated at Naruto's messy kitchen table with a hot cup of ramen steaming in front of her. She hadn't touched it yet, but when Naruto sat beside her and put an arm around her shoulders, she carefully picked up her waribashi chopsticks.

"What's the story, Hinata-chan? Why are you so upset this morning?" he asked her gently.

The worlds came a little easier now, "Yesterday you were at Ichiraku Ramen..."

"I go there every day," Naruto said, confused, "So?"

"I saw you there with..." Hinata started; the words were harder to find again, "Another girl."

Naruto paused and made a long 'hmmmmmm' sound, "I was? What did she look like?"

"She had long...b-blonde hair, and-d nice g-green eyes," she stuttered, she only stuttered when she felt insecure.

"Oh! You mean Yugito-neechan!" Naruto said with realization.

"N-neechan?"

There was a pause while things suddenly clicked, "Awww, Hinata-chan, you didn't think I was there on a date with Yugito-neechan, did you?"

"Y-yes," she said timidly.

"Hinata-chan, you are the person I care about most in the world—I could never love anyone else after loving you," Naruto said giving her a squeeze.

"R-really?" she asked apprehensively.

"That's for sure, dattebayo!" he said, smiling down at her, "Besides, Yugito-neechan is sort like a...distant relative."

"O-okay," Hinata replied.

She all of a sudden felt very silly instead of very worried. Of course she had misunderstood the situation. It was just like her to do something like that. But she was relieved all the same, and she suddenly felt very happy being next to Naruto, his arm around her as they sat at his tiny kitchen table in his very messy kitchen.

"Now, are you going to eat your ramen, or do I have to, before it gets cold?" he asked teasingly.

Giggling, she pushed the warm cup ramen towards him, "We can share."

She reached to grab him a pair of chopsticks too, when he said her name softly.

"Hinata-chan?"

She turned her head towards him questioningly and before she knew it, he had put his lips on hers in a gentle kiss. She felt the heat rising in her cheeks, pure bliss taking over. He pulled away and smiled at her, his blue eyes bright and happy. Hinata felt like she had died and gone to heaven. And then she did the next closest thing to actually dying: she fainted.

"I can't believe you want to train the day after you get out of the forest!" Sakura said, falling to the grass with a thud. Sasuke raised his eyebrows at her.

"Of course," he replied, "How else will I pass the exam?"

"Sasuke, if you ask my opinion, you could kill all the other genin—except maybe Yugito-san—in less than ten minutes if you wanted," Sakura said, rolling her eyes, "Yugito-san would probably take you half an hour at most."

"I didn't ask it," Sasuke answered simply, "Besides, I wouldn't want to defeat them in less than ten minutes. The point is to drag each fight now as long as possible."

"While still making you look good," Sakura mumbled, but he heard her anyways.

"Exactly," he retorted, "That's why I need to practice and that is why I asked you."

"Asked me so you could fight me for as long as possible without beating me..." Sakura mumbled, "Fun."

Sasuke had been quite disappointed with the number of hours he'd lost to sleep. And, Sasuke being Sasuke wasn't going to let the rest of the day go to waste. He'd convinced Sakura to train with him, telling her regardless of whether or not she came he was going to

train anyways. The rest of the afternoon passed quickly for Sasuke, but probably not as quickly for Sakura, and finally, she had reached her limit. She called for a break.

"I could put a kunai to your neck right now," Sasuke said, crossing his arms, "if this were a real fight and we were enemies."

"In an alternate reality maybe," Sakura muttered.

"Your reaction would be quite different than it is right now," Sasuke said, disapproving of her attitude.

"No it wouldn't be," she said, peeking at him with one eye, "If we just fought like we did, and I was collapsed on the ground like I am now, and you put a knife to my throat, there's only one thing I'd say to you: I surrender."

He smirked despite himself, and silently admitted defeat by sitting on the brown grass next to her.

"When it comes to fighting you, it's impossible to win," she said, rolling on her side and putting her arm under her head.

"It's impossible to win an argument against *you* ," he said, lying back on the grass too, "I do want to train more."

She sighed, "You've been so...driven lately. Especially today. You seem so determined to get better. What's wrong? I haven't seen you like this since you wanted to become the best you could be even without your sight."

He tensed a little, and he hoped Sakura hadn't noticed. He was determined to get stronger because until he knew what he was going to do about Itachi, he was going to continue on like he was going to take his older brother's life. He wouldn't have to take vengeance now, so he had some time to decide if he was going to let him live or die. He didn't want to tell Sakura this though—he hadn't told her at all about what had happened in the Forest of Death. As far as he

knew, his behaviour for the last little while had suggested he wasn't interested in revenge any longer.

"What makes you think something is wrong?" he asked, turning his head to look her in the eye.

When their eyes locked he saw uncertainty emerge. He would normally have refused to look her in the eye if something was the matter. He didn't want her to know, so instead he looked at her and created confusion as she suddenly second-guessed her accusation.

"I don't know," she said finally after searching his face, "Just don't...I don't know...do anything stupid?"

He just gave a slow nod, not breaking their gaze. She let out a quiet relieved sigh and blinked. Something had changed slightly when she blinked. For an instant everything seemed sharper than usual and then faded back to normal. But in that instant, he noticed something he hadn't noticed before. He noticed that like her hair, her eyelashes were pink. A slightly darker shade of pink, but pink nonetheless. He'd never noticed before. In fact, as he looked at her now, there were a lot of things he hadn't noticed. Before his sight had been poor, out of focus, and colourless, but as the clarity and the colour returned, he had become so enwrapped in his Chuunin Exam training that he actually hadn't had time to *look* at anything. He was grateful for his sight, but all of it had been focused on noticing his surroundings, not the details in front of him.

But now with Sakura right before his eyes, he suddenly became fascinated with detail. The shades of her pink hair—it seemed almost lighter than when they were kids, but it was still a familiar shade. The colour of her skin was creamy and pale from being mostly indoors during the winter. There was a slight tinge of red on her cheekbones that was slowly growing a darker shade as he examined her. And then he looked into her eyes, eyes he had seen but never looked at closely before—he did now.

With his senses, the iris and the pupil of the eyes were gone, and now he was struck by what he had been missing. Two perfect glassy green rings, encircling two deep dark drops of black met his gaze. He was amazed by how green her eyes were. The exterior edge was a darker emerald while the inner edge was more of a grassy colour. All along the inside of her iris, he could see tiny little thread-like coils stretching from the outer edge of her iris to the inner edge. When the sun shone in her eyes unexpectedly, the coils stretched out as her pupil contracted. He was amazed by these tiny details he never would have discovered if he hadn't ever lost his sight.

"What?" Sakura asked after a while, her voice slow and questioning—he had been staring at her for quite some time now.

"Before I couldn't see you; I still want to know what you look like," he said, mimicking the words he'd spoken to her months ago.

She looked a little startled, and the faintest hue of pink was shaded lightly over her cheeks. He smirked at this and reached his hand out towards, her face, brushing some of her hair from her eyes. She was fighting the blush, he knew, and he wondered how long it would be before it fully invaded her face. Slowly he began to trace her features like he had done on that early fall day. He ran his fingers over her eyebrow, then down the side of her cheek, tracing her jaw line. He let his fingertips pass briefly over her lips then tuck behind her ear and then along her neck, letting her hair tickle the back of his hand. He matched everything he saw with what he had felt.

He recalled his earlier imagined picture of Sakura, and made adjustments to it, committing her face to memory yet again. He adjusted the hue of her hair, and the detail of her eyes. The facial structure was the same, but he added the subtle pink hue to her cheeks in his mind, liking it better when there was a slight blush on her face.

"You look beautiful," he told her absently.

The blush fully invaded her face then, and he was mildly amused by her attempts of keeping her composure.

"Thank you," she said quickly, and then added with a nervous laugh, "Not quite a 'sexy lady' yet, though, am I?"

He gave a start for an instant, surprised by her answer, and he thought back on his comment. It was not something he normally would have thought to himself, let alone say to someone else. He hadn't really meant it other than a statement of fact—he could acknowledge that Sakura was beautiful without being attracted to her...couldn't he? He wasn't sure at this point anymore; he remained silent.

"Sorry," she said turning away so that his hand fell away from her, "I don't know why I said that."

He didn't know what to say, if anything at all. He wasn't sure *how* to respond to that. It was mostly his fault the comment had arisen, he *had* been the one to call her beautiful.

"Sasuke?" Sakura said quietly, "I know you heard what Ten Ten said to me earlier today...but you do know that I would never... I wouldn't do anything to ruin our friendship."

"I know," he replied, reaching out again and taking her hand carefully; he ran his thumb over the back of her knuckles, "I trust you."

And for some reason, the both of them felt the awkwardness melt away into nothing, like it had never been there to begin with. Perhaps it was because they both remembered they could trust each other absolutely. Or perhaps it was because they both already knew subconsciously that there was nothing to ruin, because they were already beyond the point of friendship.

Nariko's revelation about Itachi had once again changed her opinion of him; before she had been completely doting on him, and after the Shichibi incident, she feared him. But now, knowing better the circumstances of his family and hearing Itachi's vague side of the story, she couldn't help but like him again. After all, she had called them siblings, and she could just tell that Itachi's brother's hatred deeply stung Itachi, even if he didn't seem to know it himself. Being hated was something Nariko understood, and she could understand a little of how Itachi felt. He had killed everyone, yes, and was going to kill her, but she had a feeling it had something to do with Akatsuki and it was somehow the Leader's fault.

Having said that, her attachment to Itachi had grown yet again, but she still could not stop herself from giving herself injuries or bring herself to tell Itachi she knew she was going to die. She knew that if her body was weak, she would not be able to withstand the demon being removed, and it would cause problems for Akatsuki. But she didn't tell Itachi this—she had a feeling he knew anyways though, because he was being so watchful over her. That didn't stop her, however. He once commented that she was so clumsy compared to before; she replied that the sound of the rain made her dizzy.

She hated lying to Itachi, but she needed to try and preserve her life. She knew she did not want to die, but she did not want to leave, because she did not want to leave neither Itachi or Flower-chan—and perhaps Deidara too—behind. She could not leave her foster family in Akatsuki. Itachi's story had made her aware of the circumstance, and while before she had felt she was prolonging her life pointlessly, she now had a new idea. She would stay alive, and then plot to get Itachi, Flower-chan—and Deidara if he wanted—out of Akatsuki. They could run away and live somewhere where no one would find them and where it never rained.

But first she had to make sure she was unwell enough so that she could stay alive. Itachi had gone for the afternoon and left a number of books for her to read. He had gone out a week ago and bought some from what he had called a 'local bookstore'. But she had

already read most of them, and her 'twisted ankle' was almost better. She knew it should be soon if she wanted to earn herself another injury.

Slowly, she thought up different schemes in her head, thinking of where she wouldn't mind hurting herself, and how she would make it look like an accident. She knew Itachi was expecting her to read, but he didn't say where she could and couldn't read. Yes, she decided, that would be a good start, reading somewhere else. She picked up one of the books. Slowly, she walked across the room, thinking deeply.

' *You're...kill...one da...* ' came a hazy voice in her head.

Nariko grabbed the doorknob decisively and opened the door, peering up and down the halls, '*What?*'

' *I said you will end up killing yourself someday,* ' came the same voice again, clearer now that she was paying attention to it.

' *I have to let you go before that happens, so you can't let me die; you might die too if that happens,* ' she answered in her head.

The one with whom she was speaking to was the demon; for the most part she could block it out of her head, but sometimes she would let it speak to her. She had been able to communicate with it better since her injuries began, and since the year had ended. True to its word, it was doing its best to make every day after the New Years miserable for her, and most of the time she woke up at night with tears on her face. Yet still she refused to let it get to her, her mission of liberating Itachi from Akatsuki gave her the drive to push onwards.

It had been pushing the confines of its seal so that now, almost two months after the New Year began it could sometimes breach her conscious mind and speak to her. It had tried to scare her at first, but then she found this had become handy. She could now ask it what kind of injuries she could sustain without being killed and what would

be harder for it to heal. In fact, the constant bombardment of questions seemed to have deterred it in trying to make her waking hours full of misery. And at night she had grown used to the scene of the endless plain of water and the dancing lightning in the sky. She wasn't scared so much anymore, as long as she kept her distance from the hole in the cliff side where the demon was trapped.

She had grown attuned to hearing it even without meditation, and slowly it became so it would talk in her head—if she let it. It was easily ignored and shoved aside if she wished it, her mind would fall silent. It rarely liked to talk to her in her head anymore and it preferred for her soul to descend to the cliff where it was trapped, a place where it was more likely it could escape on its own.

' You were lying, you have not let me go yet,' it snarled with irritation, bringing again the futile topic of her promise.

' I can't let you go just yet. I have things I need to do, but I do promise to let you go,' she replied, walking down the halls, the sound of the rain masking her quiet footsteps; she was also thinking 'hide' to herself, *'I will let you go before a year is over since I made my promise to you.'*

' If you can stay alive that long,' it spat.

She ignored the comment and tuned it out. She had to focus for a good place to read that was still dangerous. She peeked in various empty rooms, examined a lot of different pipe work, and at one point almost considered falling down some stairs, but decided not to—it would be strange place to sit and read a book.

' Any suggestions, Raijuu-san?' she asked absently, studying a broken piece of glass seriously.

' I do not want to have to heal you,' it answered, *'I'll have no part in this.'*

Nariko hadn't seriously expected an answer from it, so she wasn't really listening. She looked around some more and then out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw a flash of red hair out the window. Nariko was terrified of the Leader, and always hid when she saw him. So when she saw the flash of red, she was instantly thrown in to anxiety; she whirled and did a double-take. She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw it was only a tattered flag dangling limply, soaked in the rain. The moment had given her an idea.

' *You will not,*' the demon said with disdain.

'Make *me stop,*' Nariko retorted—which probably wasn't a very wise thing to do—her dreams that night would be worse than ever, but for the moment, she didn't care.

She walked over to the open window and looked out and down. It was a fair drop, four floors at least.

' *You'll die,*' the demon stated factually.

' Yes,' Nariko agreed, '*Too high.*'

She looked around outside, hoping to find another window that would be a better one. There were plenty of windows, but she needed to find one that wasn't too high, and that was in a place where it made sense for her to be. She pattered down the hall again, thinking deeply.

The mess hall was two floors down, but there were usually a lot of people there, including Akatsuki members. Flower-chan wasn't usually around, which seemed to disappoint Deidara who always seemed to be there. Kisame was sometimes there, and Nariko knew not to be around when Kisame was. It seemed to Nariko that if Kisame saw her without Itachi, he would stay close to her until Itachi returned, making sure she stayed out of trouble. She was, in a sense, looking for trouble now, and Kisame would make it harder for her to harm herself.

Maybe she could fall out of a window near Flower-chan's room, saying she was looking for her and then couldn't find her. But she knew for a fact that Flower-chan was at the same meeting Itachi was at, so waiting for her to come back would make sense, but if she already knew where Flower-chan was, it made little sense to be there to begin with.

She thought briefly of saying the demon had made her jump out a window.

'If I were able to do that, I would not throw you out a window,' Raijuu answered, 'I'd sooner force you to run away.'

She suppressed its distracting voice. It wasn't helping any. She wandered down a flight of stairs, but the demon's anxiety in her stomach told her that three floors up was still too high off the ground. She looked out another window, observing the street below. Most shops along the roads were empty, but surprisingly enough, she could see a little demure shop outside not too far away. She squinted through the falling rain. It was a little like a convenience store, but a lot shadier than that; of course, Nariko didn't notice the questionable state of the store, she was instead focused on a new idea.

She quickly ran back to her room, grabbing a book, and a few coins Itachi had given her when she'd curiously asked about them. She knew how the idea of money worked, because she'd seen some of the lesser Akatsuki subordinates buy supplies from traveling merchants on the way from Land of Earth. One merchant had given her some candy for free.

She ran down the stairs, going down to the main floor. Having done some exploring from time to time, she avoided the main entrance to the building and took a side door instead. There was an umbrella stand next to the door, and she took an umbrella as an afterthought. If the Leader could decide when the rain would stop, she had the distinct impression that he'd be able to tell she was walking around in the rain. The umbrella made her feel safer, and—without even knowing—she had shielded his presence from Pain.

She walked the convenience store, which was dark inside, a poorly-working electric light flickering about the counter. The shopkeeper was reading a newspaper, which was flopped over from the damp. Nariko folded her umbrella and looked at the rows of small candies near the counter. The owner made her nervous, so she tried to stand like she'd seen Flower-chan do. The man at the counter glanced at her, his eyes traveling from her head to her feet and back—for some reason, Nariko didn't like the way he was looking at her. She took a package of small brightly coloured candies and put it where he could see them.

"I'd like these," she said in the same tone as Flower-chan's authoritative voice.

The man folded his newspaper, "One eighty."

Nariko tried to casually dig the change out, but she could feel herself getting nervous. She didn't know how much each coin was worth, nor did she know any math in order to add the numbers on them, so she gave him the biggest coin and waited. She thought she remembered that some coins would be given back, and she breathed a sigh of relief when the man returned some smaller ones.

"Come again," he said as she left; Nariko made a distinct note in her mind never to go back if she could help it.

She crossed the road under her umbrella and entered at the side entrance. The demon was puzzled about her current thought processes but she ignored it. She liked it better when she couldn't hear it when she was awake. Climbing a set of stairs, she opened the package of candy, while looking for windows she could use. One floor up, she stopped and looked out. It was the main street in front of the building below, she could see the convenience store she'd just been to. Calculating, she looked up and down the hall—there was nobody around. She dropped a couple of candies from the window; they were a bunch of colourful dots on the wet ground. She hoped the Leader wouldn't notice these.

Next, she sat herself on the edge of the window, and with the book in her right hand and the rest of the candies in her left, she took a deep breath. It would look like she had gone to the store to buy some candy to eat while she was reading. She stopped to read in a window, and had fallen out. It was only one floor up. Just one floor. She'd be okay.

She hoped.

She closed her eyes, ignoring the demon's anxious squirming in her gut. With one graceful motion she leaned backwards out of the window. And then she let gravity do the rest. She could feel the air slowly begin to rush past her as she accelerated; she felt the raindrops land on her face as she arched gracefully backwards through the air. The candies slipped from her hand as she loosened her grasp, the book falling away on the other side. She rather liked the feeling of falling—it was amazing and frightening at the same time. If she knew she would not hit the ground, she would want to fall forever. She braced herself for impact.

There was a sickening thud and a number of painful cracks as she hit the street below. Her eyes opened in shock and for an instant, Nariko couldn't breathe from having the wind knocked out of her. A great number of places felt broken and some places felt bent in ways they shouldn't be. To say her body was on fire as an inapt description. She'd never felt pain like this before. The demon was going wild within her to keep her from dying. But Nariko felt surprisingly serene despite all of this. She felt her consciousness fading—she knew she would not die, but it had been a close thing. Only one thought drifted across her mind before blackness took over.

' I am very sorry, Rokubi no Raijuu-san, Itachi-niisama...It was too high...it was too high...'

A/N: Hmm, this last scene is rather morbid. I don't know if I like writing from the perspective of someone who is doing self-inflicted harm. It's a very controversial and iffy topic to write about. **Please**

don't write angry reviews saying that I shouldn't have this in here because it might encourage emotional teenagers who need psychological help to start inflicting damage upon themselves. I do not support damaging self-inflicted actions. This was crucial to plot in a *fictional world* , don't ever do this at home, or at school, or anywhere!

Now that I've got my butt covered legally, moving on. I really liked writing the Hinata and Naruto scene. I wrote it when I went to my University to pay my fees at six in the morning because I wanted to avoid the line. You could say that the dark winter morning inspired me. The sun hadn't even risen yet. But I thought I'd mention that that is Naruto and Hinata's first kiss. Even though they've been dating for a while in Blind, I've always imagined their relationship to be a fairly conservative one. That's probably the only reason Hiashi hasn't really gotten on their case about them dating...yet. XD (That was **not** a hint that there will be Hyuuga conflict later on in Blind.)

Chapter 58

A/N: A couple of people commented saying that they were sad that Nariko died. Nariko's not dead, people! This is not a spoiler, because it said clearly in one sentence that she came close to dying, but she would survive. Now I know who's been reading carefully and who hasn't. :p

Chapter Fifty-Eight: The Rules of Engagement

Sakura found that during the winter there was very little to do. In the summer, she could go outside for any number of reasons, whether it be gardening or out for a walk. But in the winter she felt very confined. It was raining big balls of slush outside that couldn't make up their mind on whether they wanted to be rain or snow, and even though Sasuke had almost begged her—in his own subtle, refined manner—she absolutely was not going to train in that weather. Without missions, there was little to do; even hospital work was slow. Nobody was usually doing anything dastardly dangerous in the winter, namely because of the conditions. The most exciting thing the hospital was treating was frostbite, if that.

So, that day, feeling frustrated about the weather and being cooped up inside, Sakura did what she typically did when frustrated or upset: she cleaned. The house was nearly spotless as it was already, so Sakura tackled closets that day, pulling out forgotten relics for when she could throw them at a chilled, and most likely grumpy, Sasuke for him to decide whether to keep said relic projectile or to trash it.

Most things that she had dug up had accumulated in the living room—which had become a regular dumping ground. Itachi's things though, replaced some removed items in a closet, hidden away from sight; she hadn't shown them to Sasuke yet, and she hadn't planned on doing so any time soon. It worried her how driven Sasuke had

been over the past three weeks, and she didn't want anything to... push him over the edge, so to speak. She secretly would be relieved when the exam was done, and life could resume as usual. It was only five days until the tournament.

Sakura was cleaning out the hall closet by mid-afternoon, and the cold wet weather persisted. They'd had relatively good weather since October, but now in early February, it seemed like it was determined to make up for all the lost opportunities. Sakura stood on tiptoe, thinking these things to herself, reaching into the top shelf, listening to the gales outside. She bit her lip in slight worry over Sasuke, but remembered he was seventeen, and hopefully be able take care of himself, and have the sense to quit in this weather.

For all the worry Sakura was feeling, she lost attention in what she was doing, and when her fingers accidentally jarred against a box at a strange angle, she yelped and nursed her finger, her attention regained. She frowned as she tried to peek over the top of the shelf and see what the box was, but it was only when she took it down that she recognized it. It was the same box she had dug out of the same closet almost nine months ago, the one labeled "music" that had all of Sasuke's mother's songs in it.

Sakura was immediately fascinated. She had a few of the songs committed to memory which she hummed frequently—which Sasuke seemed to like—but couldn't remember them all. She was eager to learn some more—it would definitely give her something to do for the next little while. Hurriedly she was taking the box to the kitchen table—the living room was full of discards—she heard the back door bang open.

Pausing to look down the hall, she saw a dripping-wet, slush-plastered Sasuke stumble in the back door and kick off his soaked shoes. Sakura's eyes widened as she noted he was visibly shivering—undoubtedly against his will—and even his teeth were chattering a little. She almost threw the box to the kitchen table before running down the hall towards him. He tried to give her a crooked grin, but the effect was lost through chattering teeth.

"You idiot! Why did you walk all the way back here?!" she reprimanded him firmly, "Surely you've heard my rants on hypothermia!"

"I made it, didn't I?" he grumbled grouchy, not liking her greeting, which was just as cold as the weather outside.

She groaned inwardly to herself—she shouldn't have been surprised, she really shouldn't have. But why was she surprised? Oh yeah, because she forgot about Sasuke's ego. Right.

"Wet clothes, off, now," she ordered and added irritably in response to his raised eyebrows, "You know what I mean! Same rules apply as the tea-house incident."

' *So it's an "incident" now, is it?*' she wondered vaguely to herself as Sasuke stripped down to his boxers. She tried hard to ignore the perfection of his body as he stood there in his last remaining piece of clothing, melted precipitation glistening on his bare chest. She tried oh so very hard. Inner Sakura failed.

"A hot shower is in order," she said in a professional-like way as she took his arm and marched him down the hall. His skin was like ice when her fingers touched it and she began rubbing his arm to get the blood flowing, "Honestly, Sasuke, it almost seems like you're trying to train yourself to the brink of death."

She shoved him through the bathroom door, her frustration ebbing to resignation, "I'll put on some tea."

He gave her a shivering nod and shut the bathroom door.

Absently, Sakura stared at Uchiha Mikoto's sheet music as she listened to the drum of the wet snow outside and the wind, intermingled with the sound of the shower and the ticking of a nearby clock. In her mind she was humming the notes on the page that was before her, using the clock to keep time. When she got an idea of the melody, she went to the next song, and then the next, and so on.

She riffled through the pages after a bit, looking for something she hadn't tried yet, passing over the different songs; she passed over Sasuke's lullaby, and Itachi's, and a few other before mild fascination caused her to draw Itachi's lullaby from the stack.

She stared at the notes long and hard, her mind mulling. The person who Uchiha Itachi was should have been perfectly obvious: a murderer, a traitor. A cold-hearted, cruel and sadistic person—that was who Uchiha Itachi was. But somehow Sakura found herself wondering about him. The album had greatly shaken her view of Uchiha Itachi, but she still knew she could never forgive him for what he'd done to Sasuke. Yet the album had shown her something contrary to what she had always thought: she'd always thought Uchiha Itachi a born psychopath, but the album found hidden in the depths of his old bedroom had shown her something else. It had shown her that Uchiha Itachi had once been a person who had loved and laughed.

The notes danced across the page like little ants as Sakura's eyes slid out of focus. She watched them move, scattered, disoriented. They looked like they were trying to find a way off the page, but there was no way, no way out...

"What are you looking at?" came Sasuke's voice.

The notes stopped moving; Sakura looked up. Sasuke stood in the doorway of the kitchen, wearing a bathrobe-yukata, a warm towel wrapped around his shoulders. He looked a little warmer and more like he was only wet instead of half-drowned and frozen. She put the sheet music of Itachi's lullaby back with the rest, subtly sticking it in the middle of the stack. She didn't want to think how Sasuke would interpret her staring at Itachi's lullaby.

"Are you still feeling chilled? The tea's ready," she told him, and then knowing he would be suspicious if she avoided answering the question she said: "Come sit next to me and I'll show you."

Sasuke took a mug of tea obediently, and then sat down next to her at the kitchen table. She smiled a little lazily at him, and pulled the towel around his shoulders a little tighter. She wrapped one arm around his and felt his hand, which was warmer now. Reaching up with her other hand, she felt his forehead. He made a 'is that really necessary?' face at her.

She laughed, "Sorry, force of habit. You're lucky you didn't get hypothermia."

"I'll be fine," he said, brushing her hand away from his forehead, clearly more interested in what she'd been doing rather than his own health, "What were you doing?"

"I re-discovered your mother's sheet music," she answered cheerfully, pulling the pile closer to them, "I was hoping to try and remember some more because I only remember a few of them, and I know you like it when I sing her songs."

"Yes," Sasuke murmured quietly; she could see his eyes looking at the old sheets of paper with a sort of marvel in his eyes, "I do... Which one were you looking at?"

"One of the ones in the middle now; I can't remember which one it was..." she said smoothly, hoping he wouldn't care too much.

Unfortunately for her, he did care, and like an expert magician, doing a card trick, Sasuke reached in and pulled a sheet from the pile. He held it up to her with a questioning pause.

"Is this the one you were looking at?" he asked her.

She was surprised, because the one he held up to her was the one she had indeed been holding. She waited with apprehension for him to become angry with her, and storm off. But surprisingly enough, he didn't. His face became a little tenser, but he didn't say anything about it, even after her slow nod. He merely took the stack from her and spread all the sheets across the table. He studied them.

"I never knew my mother had such interest in music," Sasuke said evenly.

Sakura looked up at his face at that point. She heard the words, but she had expected his voice to be void of emotion, in a way that negated all joy from the room. His voice *had* been without emotion, but there was no tension, no misery there. She stared at him hard, and saw no wistfulness on his face. Sakura knew Sasuke had loved his mother more than anything else in the world; this was something Sakura just *knew* from everything she'd observed, heard, and learned. But now, it seemed like he was...she wasn't sure if she was crazy for thinking this, but he seemed almost at peace when he mentioned her.

He looked down at her when she didn't say anything; Sakura hurriedly struggled with a response, "She was very musically talented. Some of her songs are almost symphonic."

"You learned all her songs from here?" he asked, studying her intently.

"Yes, most of them—there are still some I don't know," she said, reminding him of her earlier statement.

"Would you be willing to teach all of them to me?" he asked her seriously.

"What? Why—all of them?" she asked, surprised.

"All of them," he confirmed, looking her in the eye.

"Even Ita—"

"Even Itachi's lullaby," he answered, and then he let the seriousness fade a little from his face, "Please, Sakura."

When he looked into her eyes like that, it stirred something in her. He was doing what he had done when she found him just before her

graduation: he was truly looking at her. She felt suddenly weaker and stronger at the same time. She felt the rust of swooping emotion in her stomach, the warmth and the happiness she felt in his presence. She loved it when he did that, she decided. She loved everything about him. She loved *him*. He was so close to her right now, one arm around her casually, yet she wanted to touch him, to hold him like she wanted. But knew she couldn't—she understood that.

She slowly reached up and put her arms around his neck slowly, and then leaned in, putting her head on his shoulder, hiding her face close to his neck, protected in the shadow of his chin. She closed her eyes and held him gently; she was hugging him differently than she normally did, in a way that people who were only friends didn't do. She knew she was stepping into the gray area that had once been a distinctive line. As long as she did not clearly cross over to the other side, it would be all right.

"Of course I'll teach you," she said quietly, "They were your mother's songs, they are her last parting gifts to you."

She understood that she could not ever cross over to the other side of the gray area, but that didn't mean she liked it.

"Of course I'll teach you," Sakura murmured quietly, her arms around him.

Sasuke could feel there was something different about the way she was holding him. It seemed better than all the other times she'd held him; it seemed almost...more intimate. Yet somehow this failed to bother him; in fact, it was flooding his body with the unknown emotion—which, even though being unable to identify it frustrated him, he liked feeling it. It mellowed him out. He felt happy, though it would not show on his face. He could feel Sakura's joy in her chakra signature, and he liked to sense it radiating off of her.

"They were your mother's songs, they are her last parting gifts to you," Sakura finished.

He closed his eyes then, a small pleased grin tugging at the corner of his mouth.

And she...she loves you, so very much.

Sasuke took his free hand and put it on the back of Sakura's head, his fingers lacing through her hair, holding her head close. He held her in the same way she held him, as best as he could, trying not to enter the gray area of blurred line, but wanting to at the same time—just a little bit.

The songs weren't his mother's last parting gifts to him—her final wish had been.

Slowly, Sasuke climbed the stairs to enter the stadium along with the other genin walking with him. They were following the third proctor, Genma, up through the labyrinthine paths of the stadium. Plodding beside him was Yugito, who seemed to be relatively cheerful; Sasuke took this as a good sign that Naruto had not annoyed her as much as he predicted.

The group of them turned a corner and then another. At the end of the hall was a set of double doors. Everyone waited as Genma pulled keys from his pocket, chewing on his toothpick distractedly as he began to pick out the key he needed to open the door. Sasuke looked around at the other participating genin—a few of them looked nervous, namely the boy Haru from the Takigakure Team, and Udon and Moegi from Konohamaru's team. Yugito and the girl Risa looked driven; Konohamaru looked like he was prepared to kick Genma would of the way in order to break the door down. The girl Michiru was glaring at Sasuke, who in turn ignored her. He mentally noted a few scars on her arms and legs that were most likely from his attack on her with his katana. He felt a little bad.

"You prepared for this?" Yugito asked, giving him a cat-like grin.

He gave her a crooked smile in return, "I had better be—I've been driving Sakura crazy with my training."

"The girlfriend?" Yugito asked teasingly. She had gotten to know Sakura a little bit over the past month, but Yugito still felt the need to throw in an occasional comment like this one. Especially after Naruto had told her that they were staying at the same place—because Naruto was a blabbermouth that way.

Sasuke gave her a mildly irritated expression, "Are *you* prepared for this?"

"Lo, he doesn't deny it, yet he avoids answering it," Yugito laughed, and then dropped the matter, "Yeah, I'm pretty much prepared. The only thing I'm nervous about is whether I'll be able to refrain from giving the Raikage the finger once we get out there."

Sasuke snorted, but at that point, Genma threw open the doors and led the eight of them out into the arena. A loud cheer erupted from the stands, as the faces of thousands of spectators looked down at them. The eight of them lined up like they had been told to do, and waited. Sasuke remembered the arena from the last time, and how he had almost been disqualified because of Kakashi making him late—again. This time he'd come early; in fact, he had been the first of the genin to arrive.

Sasuke took his place in line next to Yugito and closed his eyes, relishing in the moment. He could hear everything so clearly, he noted with satisfaction. Each individual voice could almost be heard, but was lost in the voice of another. He felt the pulse of their excitement. He could feel slight tremors in the ground from the shouting and moving of thousands of people. He was absorbed in the moment, but he discarded the shouts and the tremors. He instead sensed with what his genetic history had given him; he felt the emotion there. A rush of excitement and enthusiasm pounded loudly in each person's chakra signature. He was much more aware, just by standing there with his eyes shut, of how many people there

were, than he could with his eyes open or his ears listening. It was an amazing feeling, Sasuke had never felt anything like it.

The sea of signatures flickered like a dancing fire, and combined, they almost matched the brightness of Nekomata's chakra. He began combing through the signatures, concentrating, searching. He was looking for one person among all of those; it didn't take long, it was hard to miss the signature of someone he had spent so much time with, cared so much about. He could feel Sakura there, feel her pride, her love, for him. He opened his eyes, looking directly at her position; and there she was, her pink locks, and green eyes. She was there, staring right back at him. It seemed for that moment that everything seemed to freeze He could see her face, her expression one of surprise, and then a smile spread across her face, like it were in slow motion.

Sasuke became distracted when a hush fell over the crowd as Genma raised his arm for silence. In that blink, the moment was gone. His eyes slid towards the third Proctor.

"Today is the day of the Final Stage of the Chuunin Exam," Genma announced, "Before you stand the eight remaining contestants. I would like to take a moment to introduce each one before we begin."

Sasuke listened to the sound of polite applause as Genma began introducing the genin one by one. He started by introducing the Takigakure shinobi, then he announced the names of Konohamaru's teammates. Konohamaru himself looked like he would burst from excitement when his name was called out. He nearly did, too; he jumped in the air, pumping a fist as "Sarutobi Konohamaru" was shouted. Yugito gave a slow nod when her name was called, her guard up again when in the presence of so many strangers. Finally, Sasuke himself was announced. The moment that Genma's voice rang out "Uchiha Sasuke" a ripple of murmured surprise flowed through the crowd, intermingled with distracted applause.

To those in Konoha who hadn't known he was back, they knew now. To most of the other villages, the Uchiha history was a well-known

one, and especially the shinobi of higher ranks would recognize his name from the Bingo Book. He'd since been removed from that book, but it was probably assumed that the reason he could no longer be found in its pages was because he'd been killed off. It was clear that a lot of people were surprised that—for obvious reasons—he was in Konoha taking the Exam.

Sasuke did nothing in response to the crowd. So, introductions done, Genma began to recite the rules of engagement to the genin and the audience. But nobody in the audience was entirely paying attention. Quite a few whispers still were swarming through the spectators, and Sasuke could spot the Raikage seated next to the Hokage, watching him and Yugito.

"The rules of engagement exist as follows: you may use whatever skills you possess in order to defeat your opponent," Genma was saying now, "The match is over when either one of the contestants is unable to fight any longer. When I, the referee, call the match closed, all attacks must stop henceforth immediately. Further attacks will result in instantaneous disqualification for the attacker. Are there any questions?"

It was the nervous boy from Takigakure Team that spoke up, "What are the chances of a fatality occurring?"

"That will depend on your opponent. But rest assured that all measures to stop the fight before a death occurs will be taken," Genma answered.

The other two members of the team cast him a deep frown each, clearly disapproving of his question. Sasuke vaguely wondered if the other two girls on Haru's team would hesitate to kill him if it meant they could become Chuunin.

"If there are no further questions," Genma paused to allow for an interruption, "then we will begin."

Sasuke smirked to himself. He could hardly wait.

Sakura could see that smirk even from where she was seated, third row from the back. Excitement had risen the instant the contestants had filed onto the green; the final trial was finally here. Sasuke had been training months for this, and now she'd get to see the fruits of that effort. She recognized some of the other finalists, and saw Yugito down there as well. Over the past month Yugito had sometimes come and hung out with their group. She and Naruto had formed some kind of bond, and subsequently, Hinata had also taken a liking to the Kumogakure kunoichi. Both Hinata and Naruto referred to her as "nee-chan".

As for the other contestants, Sakura was surprised to see Team Konohamaru there. She hadn't really paid attention to whom was present in leaving the forest, she'd just been glad to see Sasuke virtually unscathed—save for a tear in the palm of his hand and the fact that he'd been without a shower for three days—that she didn't really notice who else had passed.

The crowd erupted into cheers as the opponents went to the waiting box—which was sadly just outside Sakura's view—leaving the first two opponents standing on the battlefield. Beside her, Ino let out a squeal of excitement.

"I haven't been this excited about any exam since Shikamaru took the Jounin Exam," Ino exclaimed delightedly.

"I remember," Sakura laughed, remembering her closest friend standing up on her seat shouting her loudest for Shikamaru.

"But where is Sai-kun?" Ino asked suddenly, peering in vain at the waiting box, which was out of Ino's sight as well, "I didn't see him with the group down there. Did you?"

Sakura shook her head, "No, I didn't. Maybe he dropped out?"

"But why would he do that?" Ino lamented, "I was looking forward to cheering him on."

"We can find out later," Sakura said with a hushing tone, "The first fight is starting now."

"Where's Naruto? He said he'd get snacks!" Ino complained in a hushed voice looking around one last time before turning her attention to the fight.

The first fight was between Moegi from Team Konohamaru, and a girl from Takigakure, according to Genma, though Sakura couldn't rightly see the headband. The fight began with a word from the third proctor and soon the two girls were fighting in close range combat, making it difficult for anyone to see what was actually transpiring.

"It looks to me like their bitch-slapping," Ino commented after a while, "Like we did that one time during the preliminaries. Remember?"

Sakura laughed, "I guess it could be called that, though I like to think our fight was a little more dignified to be called 'bitch-slapping'."

"Well, *they're* bitch-slapping," Ino insisted, "Look at them, they're almost tearing each other's hair out!"

This continued on for about five minutes before anything tactical finally happened. There was a pause and then both girls leapt away from one another at the same time. Sakura squinted as a collective sound of sympathy went around. At first it appeared that both girls were only marred with light wounds, but as things continued, it suddenly appeared Moegi wounds were getting worse.

"What's happening to her?" Ino asked as the wounds began to fest right before their eyes.

"It's a poison," Sakura said with sudden revelation, "It was developed during the Great Shinobi Wars as a form of chemical warfare."

"You're right! I know that one, it was developed by the Village Hidden in Waterfalls, wasn't it?" Ino said with wide eyes.

"Yes, which is probably why she has it," Sakura answered.

"Oi, guys, what're you talking about?" Naruto asked, sitting down on the other side of Sakura, with a number of assorted snacks tucked under his arm.

"Moegi's been poisoned," Sakura replied, watching as the red-haired girl began to clutch desperately at a wound which had started to spew a lot of blood, "You missed the first half of the fight."

"Poisoned? She looks like she's been burned!" Naruto exclaimed when he looked at Moegi, almost dropping a Styrofoam container of dango.

"It irritates existing wounds, opening them up even more, causing severe damage after an extended period of time," Ino stated, "I hope Genma calls the match or soon she'll be seriously hurt."

"I don't think Moegi has a chance of winning this one," Sakura said, absently taking a stick of dango from Naruto's container.

Ino shook her head. The Takigakure kunoichi pulled out a set of fans and was now advancing on Moegi, who was barely holding her off. The more Moegi moved, the more exhausted she became. Sakura watched with concern and cast glances at Genma. Suddenly the Takigakure kunoichi stopped, her fan's bladed edge at Moegi's neck. Moegi's face was in shock, her eyes wide as she looked at the fan. And suddenly, without warning, the red-haired girl fell over, passed out. Sakura breathed a sigh of relief as Genma declared the Takigakure girl the winner, and two medics rushed out to take Moegi away on a stretcher. Konohamaru's concerned shouts could be heard over the cheering crowd.

"That was a short fight," Ino commented, reaching past Sakura and stealing some snacks from Naruto.

"Ten minutes at the least," Sakura agreed, munching on her own stick of dango.

"Who's fighting next?" Naruto asked, mouth full of uncooked instant ramen noodles, not noticing that Kiba, sitting on his other side, had just surreptitiously taken a handful of Chiroru chocolates.

"Be quiet and listen!" Ino hissed.

"The next match will be between Sarutobi Konohamaru and Uchiha Sasuke," rang out Genma's voice, and wild cheers erupted from all of Konoha's inhabitants that were present, Naruto being the loudest of all. Sasuke and Konohamaru walked into view and many people craned their necks to get a better look. Sakura was sure some people couldn't be certain if they'd heard correctly, and were trying to find out if there really was an Uchiha competing. She smiled as the Uchiha insignia blared out from Sasuke's back when he faced Konohamaru; he was almost like a celebrity, as much as a young man with a criminal status could be a celebrity.

Konohamaru and Sasuke bowed to each other on Genma's command, then Genma shouted for the match to begin. It was at that point that Sasuke did something unexpected. He said something to Konohamaru and held out his hand in an assuring manner. Slowly, Sasuke reached back with one hand to his Kunai pouch, holding out the other to make sure that Konohamaru knew he wasn't going to try anything funny. Konohamaru hadn't moved, but was still standing in ready position. Muttering began to erupt a little as people began to question Sasuke's actions. Sakura too was confused until she saw what he pulled from his kunai pouch. A piece of white fabric fluttered in the winter wind. Sasuke raised the fabric to his eyes and neatly blindfolded himself. The mutters multiplied a hundredfold as people marveled at what was either arrogance or stupidity.

"What? He's going to go blindfolded?" Ino asked, aghast.

"He could fight without his sight before," Naruto quipped, "But that bastard is making me look bad. Even I can't do that."

"There are a lot of things that you can't even do," Ino remarked with a roll of her eyes.

Naruto folded his arms and sulked. Sakura could only smile. It would definitely impress the judges if he could fight blindfolded, especially if Sasuke won. Sasuke said something more to Konohamaru—probably telling him he was ready—and then it really began. Or it should have. Konohamaru seemed to be unsure of how he was supposed to react to Sasuke's blindfold, and stood still for another few seconds, pondering.

Sasuke, impatient with this, ended up being the first to attack; with a sudden lunge, he sprinted towards Konohamaru, drawing a kunai. He let Konohamaru get out of the way, but it appeared that Konohamaru had just barely made it out of the way in time. Sakura inwardly twitched as she remembered the long hours of fighting she'd done with Sasuke, resulting in no victories. Konohamaru sought refuge behind a nearby tree, peeking out from behind it. The last time Konohamaru had fought Sasuke, Sasuke had not developed his chakra senses yet, and had barely won against the genin. And that was why Konohamaru probably did not realize that hiding behind a tree was useless, even if Sasuke was blindfolded.

As expected, Sasuke made right for the tree, a hand flaring up with chidori after lightning-fast hand signs. Instead of going around the tree, Sasuke completely obliterated it. The tree literally exploded, shards of splintered wood raining everywhere. Sasuke, with his senses, would be able to see all the shards, front and back, and was deflecting the bigger chunks with his kunai. Konohamaru, lacking that luxury, was shielding his eyes from damage and unfortunately, got a pretty large chunk above his knee. The wound wasn't deep enough that it impaired his running, for he was able to dodge Sasuke's darting Kunai, but he was limping a little.

The crowd was murmuring in surprise, some people were cheering, others watching intently. Sasuke, blindfolded, had knocked away chunks of flying wood with his kunai, and Konohamaru, who was able to see, was running away. It made little sense to those oblivious, even Ino was a little perplexed.

"What just happened?" she asked, frowning a little in confusion, "To the tree, I mean."

"When lightning strikes a tree, the heat is so intense that it causes the sap to boil instantly," Sakura answered, not sure where she picked up this bit of random trivia, "Sometimes this will cause the tree to explode. Sasuke's chidori essentially did just that."

"Then his chidori was fully charged!" Naruto exclaimed, "What is that bastard thinking? He could kill Konohamaru!"

"He won't hit him, he's missing on purpose," Sakura reassured him, "He's trying to win without winning right away. He's showing off."

Naruto grumbled under his breath, but Sakura wasn't listening. She was instead absorbed in what was happening. Konohamaru had managed to put a little distance between him and Sasuke, which of course, Sasuke had allowed. Sasuke was throwing chidori-like darts at Konohamaru, like the ones Sakura had seen him use when they were on the mission to Kumogakure. They weren't charged all that high power compared to his chidori, as a few had hit Konohamaru and had done nothing more than caused burn marks to appear at the point of contact. The young Sarutobi was darting in between trees to try and avoid the number of hits landed on him, but then suddenly, Sasuke took out two chidori darts, one in each hand, and flung them in two different directions. One struck Konohamaru square in the chest, while the other flew into a treetop. Konohamaru fell to the ground with a thud, leaving behind a log in his place. It was a replacement jutsu, Sakura recognized. The other dart, produced a loud yelp, and the real Konohamaru fell out of the tree, landing hard on his back.

Sasuke, paused for a moment, waiting to see Konohamaru's reaction, and relaxed his stance slightly. There was a pause all around the stadium, and Genma slowly began to raise his hand in the air to call the victory of Sasuke, but then there was a movement from the fallen boy. Sasuke took ready stance again as Konohamaru slowly rolled over. Painstakingly, the boy pushed himself to his

knees, and from his knees, to his feet. Konohamaru stared at Sasuke, and took a step forward. Like Naruto, Konohamaru was resilient and stubborn. Another step. Followed by another. Slowly, Konohamaru shuffled his way forwards, so he was out of the shadow of the trees. Sasuke reached back and took a few shuriken from his shuriken pouch.

"That's it!" Konohamaru shouted; despite his obvious fatigue and pain, his voice still rang strong throughout the stadium, "I didn't want to use this on you, but you asked for it!"

People in the audience peered to get a better look at Konohamaru, and necks began craning. Sasuke was paused with wariness, and it was Naruto who gave Sakura some idea of what was going to happen before it actually happened.

"Uh-oh," Naruto muttered the very instant before Konohamaru hollered one word: "HENGGE!"

A puff of smoke went up, swept quickly away by the winter wind, leaving behind a stark naked figure standing in the middle of the arena. But there was something more alarming than the fact that Konohamaru had used the Sexy no Jutsu in front of a crowd of people, and that was that Sakura recognized the person Konohamaru had turned into. She recognized that person all too well. The same green eyes and the same shade of pink hair adorned the figure standing there.

"Oh...my..." Ino started quietly.

"Oh, gods," Sakura whispered, and then cast the quickest henge no jutsu on herself, disguising herself as a homely-looking girl with pale blonde hair like Ino's. People near her would clearly make the connection between her and Konohamaru's henge no jutsu if she kept her pink hair.

The stadium was stunned. Half of the people seemed stunned by the inappropriateness of the situation, while the other half was trying to

figure out what happened. The only person who seemed unaffected, was Sasuke. Unaffected, was not the word. He was affected, but it was not the desired affect that Konohamaru had probably sought. It was obvious that he was absolutely furious. Within three seconds of the henge technique, Sasuke rushed forwards, his hand stretched out in front of him. The instant his fingers touched Konohamaru/Sakura's forehead, he let out a roar that was louder and clearer than Konohamaru's had been.

"KAI!"

The illusion was gone instantly, and in less than five seconds flat afterwards, Konohamaru was lying on the ground on his stomach, one arm twisted behind his back, a kunai pointed at his neck. The audience was left in another stunned silence, but this time because a number of them now were now trying to sort out what they'd just witnessed, and the other portion was amazed by the sudden retaliation.

"I don't think I've seen Sasuke that pissed since we ran into that asshole, Itachi," Naruto comment in the midst of the silence.

Down in the arena, Sasuke kept his foot planted firmly on Konohamaru's back, twisting the boy's arm back enough so that it was borderline painful. The kunai poised at Konohamaru's throat was shaking from anger.

"Not. Funny," Sasuke told him quietly, his voice deadly.

Konohamaru didn't even bother trying to escape now. The boy remained rigid with fear.

"The winner of this match is Uchiha Sasuke!" Genma declared.

Sasuke almost didn't hear him, but slowly he removed his weapon. But he did not let Konohamaru stand until the kunai had been put

away. And he did not look away from him until the blood had stopped pounding in his ears.

Sasuke walked back up the stairs towards the little nook of waiting combatants, still inwardly furious. He was angry with Konohamaru for disgracing Sakura in front of the entire stadium. Konohamaru *knew* Sakura too; yet he obviously hadn't thought of Sakura's feelings or reputation before he did what he had done. He inwardly seethed.

Taking his space next to Yugito, he brooded while the Takigakure boy and Rame—Udon, went down to fight. He rested his elbows on the metal railing and folded his fingers under his nose with a sour air. Beside him, Yugito was looking at him with hesitation, uncertain of what to say. Sasuke was glad Konohamaru was required to leave the box of contestants and sit elsewhere now that he had lost, because Sasuke knew he'd have a hard time concentrating while he was angry.

"I didn't know you could break a transformation like that," Yugito said, turning her head away from him. The remark was casual.

"Henge no jutsu is essentially a genjutsu place on one's self," Sasuke replied, defaulting to an emotionless voice, "When a shock or blow is taken, it breaks the concentration needed to maintain it, thus returning the use to his or her original form. 'Kai' disrupts chakra in general, not just genjutsu. It can be used against ninjutsu too, but it it's like trying to block a light source the instant it comes on and still prevent light from illuminating the room."

"Like trying to cut lightning and keeping it from touching the ground," Yugito offered as another example. Sasuke decided not to tell her that it was very possible to cut lightning: it was called Raikiri.

Some of Sasuke's anger had faded now and he watched the two boys fight it out. They seemed to be around the same skill level, but that wasn't saying much. Both weren't particularly good to start with.

He watched disinterestedly while Udon chased an illusion around while the Haru boy was trying to beat off some self-redirecting weapons. They seemed to follow Haru and continually tried to stab him. Udon on the other hand, seemed to think that Haru had messed up his technique somehow, because they kept flying towards the real Haru instead of the illusion he was seeing. Haru was having difficulty because Udon kept throwing new weapons, while Udon was just failing to realize he was in an illusion.

"Fighting with a blindfold on is one thing, but watching the fight with it on is another," Yugito said waving her hand in front of Sasuke's face, "Are you really blindfolded? Or is the fabric actually transparent? It's like you can see."

Sasuke lifted his head up in surprise—he'd forgotten he was still wearing the blindfold. He took it off as casually as he could, the coloured world greeting his eyes. He was so used to seeing with his senses he hadn't noticed the difference. He handed the blindfold to Yugito to examine it.

"It's not see-through," Sasuke said, taking it back from her after she had experimentally held it over her eyes.

"I don't supposed you'll tell me what you did in order to see," Yugito said, resting her arms on the railing.

"You're assuming that I had some method for seeing," Sasuke answered, "And even if I did, and even if I were to tell you, I'd tell you after the exam. But don't expect it."

Sasuke trained his eyes on the fight—which had been much easier to follow with his senses, as he had a better idea of what was going on. It soon came to an end, however, when Udon threw a kunai at the illusion. Real Haru just happened to be standing directly behind Udon; the kunai did a one-eighty and ended up stabbing Udon deeply in the shoulder. Haru took advantage of the immobilized Udon and ran over, putting a kunai to the booger-y boy's neck.

"It looked much cooler when you did it like that," Yugito said off-handedly.

The weapon in Udon's chest was still after Haru, and pulled itself through Udon's shoulder and flung itself at the Takigakure shinobi on the other side. It barely missed him, and Haru struggled to snatch it out of the air before it actually hurt him. Even though Udon had a huge hole in his shoulder, it definitely was a comical sight.

" *Much* cooler when you did it," Yugito muttered.

Genma called the match to an end and Udon was taken out on a stretcher. Genma declared Haru the winner, and the timid boy quickly shuffled up to the waiting box. The other two Takigakure kunoichi congratulated him though Michiru's eyes looked cold when she said it. She still had her eyes trained on Sasuke. Next, Genma called the name of the third and final Takigakure ninja. Yugito leapt up onto the railing, and perched there, balancing like a cat. She gave Sasuke one last Cheshire grin.

"My turn," Yugito she smiled, and then dropped down below.

A/N: Finally done this chapter (dances). Even though many of you tell me might fight scenes are really good, I really struggle with them. I usually have no idea what to do for a fight. The minor fights between the other contestants are the hardest, to tell the truth, because I don't care enough about those minor characters. That's why they're mostly short and to the point. I can't wait to get the exam over with. (groans)

Chapter 59

A/N: Wow, the reaction to the previous chapter was really good. Nobody seemed to have anything bad to say about it, other than those who hate fight scenes like me, and but they were okay with it too, which surprised me. Thanks for all the overwhelming support guys! I love you all!

Sorry for the delayed update! Yesterday was absolute chaos. It was my best friend's birthday; we met for lunch and then were going to hang out at my house, but then, two blocks away from the mall we had lunch at, my car broke down and I barely managed to pull into a gas station. I forgot my cellphone, so I had to go inside to ask if I could use their phone, and then waited half an hour for my dad to rescue me. Luckily, my dad knew what was wrong with my car and fixed it in ten minutes. So then I had to phone my best friend on my dad's cell phone to let her know I hadn't died, and then I had to go drive a couple people home from school. In all the chaos, I forgot to update, until this morning. Sorry!

Oh and another thing: the lovely **Shiruie** wrote a beautiful little drabble based on Blind, as a tribute to this story. I would love it if you guys went and read it too!

It can be found here:

[http://www\(dot\)fanfiction\(dot\)net/s/4899880/1/Not_blind_wise](http://www(dot)fanfiction(dot)net/s/4899880/1/Not_blind_wise)

It's also located under my favourite stories, called Not Blind, Wise. For those of you who prefer this method of access.

Thanks again Shiruie-san! (hugs)

Chapter Fifty-Nine: Erratic

With catlike grace, Yugito landed on her feet on the earth of the arena, her hand held out for balance. Her eyes darted up briefly to where the Raikage sat before they flicked away again. Slowly, she straightened up from her semi-crouch, walking the few paces forwards towards where Genma the Proctor stood. Behind her, the Takigakure kunoichi named Risa was dashing across the ground, feeling more comfortable with taking the stairs.

With one hand on her hip, Yugito looked over her shoulder impatiently; this would be her first fight, and she knew she would win, but she knew she had to impress the Raikage. If she won her two matches, and Sasuke won his next fight, they would be fighting one another, and that was exactly what she wanted. He was probably the only person of the finalists who would be a formidable opponent, and she was pretty sure she could beat him too. After all, she had Nekomata's chakra on her side in addition to that of her own. And if she got to fight Sasuke, she would get to use a number techniques that she would have to restrain against this girl; she wanted the Raikage to know her full worth. She wanted him to recognize her, because if he did that, maybe some people in the village would start respecting her. She didn't want to become Raikage like Naruto wanted to become Hokage, but maybe if the Raikage acknowledged her as a powerful ally, others would start to accept her too.

She had spent most of the last month with Naruto and Sasuke, and with the pink-haired kunoichi, Sakura, who was something like Sasuke's girlfriend, but not. It was nice to have people to talk to, who didn't look at her with disgust. She was amazed by how much the people around Naruto trusted him and respected him, and only a couple times did a few people ever pass him and give him dirty looks; Naruto genuinely didn't even notice. She on the other hand, noticed every single look cast her way, and while she pretended she didn't care or notice, she felt every single one. She had to become Chuunin, she had to become respectable in the Raikage's eyes, because then maybe she could finally be accepted by everyone, like Naruto had been accepted, and like how her father had accepted her.

All of this passed through Yugito's mind as her green eyes stayed trained on the girl, a determined fury flaming up. She would win, and she would fight Sasuke.

"Begin!"

Risa pulled out her set of tonfa, and Yugito crouched low into a cat stance, her hands poised in front of her, awaiting the Takigakure kunoichi's first move. She was going to wait and see what she would be put up against; in the Forest of Death, Sasuke had fought Risa, not her, and he had incapacitated her with lightning element chakra and speed. Yugito neither had that speed or the lightning element chakra, she would have to defeat Risa using a style that suited her own taste. Thirty seconds passed before the first person moved. Risa was the one who braved a first assault; charging forwards, she lashed out with her tonfa while trying to sweep Yugito's base leg out from underneath her. Yugito had her back foot planted firmly enough though, that Risa's kick wasn't strong enough to cause her to buckle. The tonfa attack was thwarted with a few quick blocks from Yugito's arms. But it was clear that Risa's arms were stronger than her legs, because the blow to Yugito's arms was much more powerful than the sweeping kick. There would be bruises later.

Cat stance had always been Yugito's favourite stance among all the rest. Mostly because it was called "cat stance", but that wasn't the only reason. It was a very difficult stance to maintain for long periods of time, and in her own school days in Kumogakure, where she had been ostracized and teased, she was determined to be good at something that nobody else was. It required what was basically sitting on an invisible chair, using one leg to support yourself; it was to be low, so that your thigh was almost ninety-degrees to your shins. One foot was placed a foot-length in front of the other, slightly to the side, resting on the ground, only the ball of the foot touching. In actuality, the weighting of the back leg versus the front leg was to be ninety percent and ten percent respectively, but it was very hard to balance correctly. Either one had too much weight on the front

foot, or none at all. What made Yugito's cat stance strong was that she had managed to balance it perfectly.

Blocking the blows Risa sent her way, she jabbed swiftly between them whenever she could. She humored Risa in this regard for a while, waiting for the perfect opening to be created. A blow from above came, and Yugito blocked it with an upper-session block, and as the other tonfa came in from the side, she blocked it with a lower-session block. An opening had been created. Switching all weight to her back foot, Yugito lifted her front leg in a swift, yet powerful, kick. She had her foot back on the ground before Risa could grab it, not that the girl could anyway, she had been sent flying.

Before the Takigakure girl could even get up, Yugito had taken a charge forward before leaping into the air. From her aerial view, she could see the girl lying on the ground dazed in the brief moments of trying to comprehend what transpired. Quickly reaching into her weapon's pouch, Yugito withdrew eight Shuriken and held one between each finger. She flung them downwards towards Risa's spread-eagled form, her aim precise. Each one pinned a corner of clothing, trapping the girl to the ground. As Yugito began her descent from the peak of her leap, she withdrew a kunai, planning on pulling a Sasuke with near equal style and finesse. However, something interfered.

Risa spotted her in the air, and Yugito saw her eyes go wide. Because the girl was wearing a T-shirt, her arms were still free—this could not work to push herself from the ground, but she took advantage of what little moving space she had. Putting her hands together, she performed a series of hand signs, moving as quickly as she could in order to squeeze them all in before she lost the match. There was a rumbling sound that started in the earth, vibrating loudly.

' *An earthquake?*' Yugito wondered, pausing in her assault.

Risa completed the last seal and shouted loudly: "Yadama no ishi no jutsu!"

Out of the very earth itself shot up hundreds of fist-sized rocks, coming straight towards Yugito. The kunai Yugito had intended to use as her victory weapon was now used in defense as she struggled to move fast enough to block most of the rocks. A lot of them still hit her in places where she could not afford to block in fear of getting hit in the head—like her legs—and she felt the bruising well up quickly. She landed on her feet, though her footing was a bit wobbly from the damage inflicted on her lower body. The jutsu clocked out, and all the rocks stopped their barrage, but Risa wasn't finished yet. She had managed to yank one shoulder loose and was quickly freeing herself. Yugito recovered herself; though her legs were in much pain, she could still use them—nothing was torn or broken.

Risa now was using more hand signs and Yugito wasn't certain if she should try and stop the girl from using her technique, forcing her sore legs to vault the distance between them, or brace herself for what would come next. She ended up having to choose the latter of the two because this technique had fewer hand signs.

"Katsu tsuchi no jutsu!"

The ground beneath Yugito's feet began to shift; not in the manner of shaking like an earthquake, but it began to roll like waves in the ocean. Yugito almost fell over as the first wave hit her, but managed to stay firmly upright, bracing her legs against the roll of the waves of ground. Risa was braced with one arm held out, looking like a professional surfer amongst the rolls of earth. Yugito studied Risa; while one arm was stretched out, the other was holding her tonfa against the ground, creating a sort of anchor point. The other tonfa in Risa's outstretched arm suddenly came down, so that the butt of the weapon was planted in the earth. At the same moment, a stalagmite rose up from the ground between Yugito's feet. Luckily for her she noticed, otherwise she would have been struck hard. With last minute avoidance, Yugito dodged the stalagmite. Only just regaining her footing Risa banged her tonfa again, and two more stalagmites emerged.

Yugito was then forced to start dodging numerous stalagmites. After enduring this for several minutes, Yugito started to get frustrated. Her sore legs were already impeding her movements, and having to dodge very ground she stood on was starting to irritate her. After a few minutes of enduring the stalagmites she had figured out that every time Risa pounded her tonfa, it caused a stalagmite to emerge, but she still had no idea what exactly was causing the ground to keep moving. In order to keep a ninjutsu going for this long, the user had to maintain a constant application of chakra.

For the time being, Yugito decided to make an effort to destroy at least one of Risa's tonfa in order to break the constant barrage of stalagmites. She was pretty sure the weapon was the means by which she channeled her chakra in order to attack otherwise she wouldn't use them at all. Dodging her way past charging stalagmites and nimbly sailing the rolling waves of ground she went for Risa. The girl began pounding her tonfa with more agitation, but Yugito by now was certain the tonfa played a role, and instead of dodging the stalagmites, she began predicting their appearances, and using them as platforms to cross the moving earth, like secure rocks over a stormy sea.

Yugito made some quick hand signs as she approached the girl, and then flames spilled out of her right hand, engulfing it to the wrist, but not burning her skin. She made a fist and with as much power as she could, pulled back and threw her arm forwards in a flying punch towards the girl. She braced the bones in her hands with chakra, preparing for impact. She was either going to hit Risa, or one of her tonfa. Yugito wore a catlike grin as it was the latter. At the very last moment before being struck, Risa moved her tonfa in the way. The effect was instant—the single tonfa shattered under the force of the blow, and the fire consumed the shards. The stalagmites stopped.

Risa, in a daze of what just happened, hesitated a second too long. Yugito swept her feet out from under her. The remaining tonfa, which had still been planted in the ground, was jerked up at the felling of its wielder—the earth stopped moving. Yugito kicked it away from Risa,

and before the girl could make any hand signs, Yugito had one wrist pinned under her triumphant foot. Risa grabbed some loose dust from the ground and tried to hurl it at Yugito's face, but she blocked with her still-flaming hand. The dust particles burned up in proximity, causing a flare in the flames; Risa screamed as her hand was burned when Yugito grabbed it.

"Toyotomi Risa is no longer able to fight," Genma announced, "The winner of this match—"

But Yugito didn't need to hear her own name to know who won, she knew she had this match in the bag, and if she and Sasuke both won their next matches, which they undoubtedly would, they would fight. She let Risa go as two medics rushed up to check the severity of the burn on her wrist. Yugito allowed the flames to temper and die, and with somewhat stiff grace—stiff from her sore legs—she returned to the waiting box, anticipation bubbling up inside her.

Sasuke's next opponent was the girl Michiru. Since their encounter in the Forest of Death, it was obvious she held a deep grudge against Sasuke for what he had done to her. She seemed to have made it her goal to defeat him in combat in order to negate the vendetta she had set up between them. Simply by staring at her from across the field at her now told him as much. She was glaring at him with ferocity as she prepared herself to fight. She seemed particularly enraged when Sasuke secured the blindfold around his eyes—perhaps she was hoping that he thought she would be worth fighting using his vision.

Genma's word to begin was barely finished before she launched herself at Sasuke, her face marred with obvious fury. She drew both her fans at her approach, throwing one directly at him. This made no difference however, because he simply moved to the side, dodging the fan on one side, and blocking her attack on the other. She had attempted to slice his side as she flew past, but Sasuke was not one to be so easily caught off guard.

Once past him, she skidded to a halt and threw her other fan at him, the same time the other one was boomeranging back at him. The positioning the two fans had in relation to one another was difficult to avoid by standing still—he held his ground until the last possible second, then used his remarkable speed to move out of the way, and move back. To someone who wasn't watching carefully, it would look like he hadn't moved at all. The second fan spun around and came back to the Takigakure kunoichi's hand, while the other embedded itself in the ground.

Michiru didn't move for a second, and in that second, Sasuke realized what she was doing. He leapt out of the way as a charge of electricity shot between the two fans. Calmly, he took this into consideration as he landed gracefully next to the fan on the ground. From what he could tell, from observing her here, and from observing her in the Forest of Death, not only could she dispel lightning elemental attacks, but she could send a discharge that leapt between her weapons. There were only two options he could really consider when fighting her.

She seemed to favor her element, which was understandable—few genin had mastery over one element, and it would make her look good. Sasuke's fire element was no weaker or stronger than her lightning one, but the amount of power put behind each element would definitely make a difference. He could either overwhelm her with his fire ninjutsu, or he could try and attack her with her own element, and try to overpower her with the sheer strength of his own lightning element. He had not yet revealed that he had dual elements under his belt, and that would look good, but the thing was, did he want to tip off his last opponent?

"I'm not done yet, you asshole," she snarled, though she eyed her idle fan with a little unease.

It seemed that it would be to his advantage if he tried to destroy it, but he didn't know if he wanted to cripple her that badly at the beginning of the fight. Instead, he slowly bent down, testing around it for anything that could be dangerous, but not sensing any dangerous

chakra, he picked it up gingerly and tossed it back to her. She looked reluctantly surprised.

"Good," he answered, "I would be severely disappointed if that was all you had for me."

That seemed to make her angrier that she already was. She reached back into her kunai pouch and took out a handful of weapons, shuriken, kunai and even some throwing needles. She was pretty fast for her skill level, Sasuke acknowledged, as she moved throughout the stadium. She was methodically throwing her weapons in different directions. Sasuke saw what she was doing even as she began—each weapon had a thread-like wire attached to its end. They would be impossible to see unless the sun glinted off of them. But of course, Sasuke could see them with his senses, so easily that it was almost funny.

He wasn't quite sure what to do in all honesty. He could try to stop her, but what would that accomplish? It wasn't as if he was particularly worried about her attack. He was wary, of course, he didn't underestimate her, but he could see many openings in her web, and he knew if he wanted to, it would be easy enough to snap the wires with his katana, given how tightly they were wound. So he merely stood there waiting until she was finished. She finished her web-work and, seeming insulted that he didn't seem to be paying attention to her, she landed a distance behind him. She threw a kunai at his turned back, but of course he hadn't ignored her at all. He rounded and deflected it. He was a little annoyed with her, to be honest.

She clenched her jaw in anger—had she really been hoping he would get hit by the kunai? She discarded her disappointment. In her one hand she held the tail ends of most of the wires; these she clutched with some conviction, and Sasuke was wary of the wires now. It seemed that she had some darker device for them aside from just trying to trap him. With slow deliberate movements, she pulled out a scroll from her kunai pouch with her free hand.

"Let's see you handle this, Uchiha," he heard her say—he only heard it with a combination of his sharp hearing and a moment of stillness from the wind.

The scroll was quickly unfurled and laid out on the ground before her. Sasuke toyed with the idea of trying to stop whatever she was doing—it would be more prudent if he did, but on the other hand he was dragging out this fight. Not to mention the girl, Michiru, needed some time to do some showing off of her own. He was definitely going to be Chuunin, but he wasn't trying to prevent anyone else from being one. Except maybe Konohamaru—it wouldn't be a good idea if he became one at this point in time.

Sasuke decided to watch and see what was going to be thrown at him. He watched as Michiru moved her hand to her mouth, and Sasuke assumed she was going to bite her thumb. Instead, she inserted the heel of her palm in her mouth, and bit down hard. The skin on her palm cut open, and her hand was soon dripping with blood. She bent down and smeared her whole palm over the length of the scroll—there was so much blood that it was distinctly pooled on the paper's surface.

Out of the air came hurtling lightning bolts. Sasuke's eyes widened for an instant before he stabbed the ground with his katana and dove down away from it. Sasuke then focused his chakra at creating a redirecting current through his body that would keep him from getting shocked by the raining lightning. It wasn't like a thunderstorm type lightning, but it still had some bite to it. He had almost gotten hit too—if the metal wires hadn't taken some of the attack, he would have been hit directly. As it was, he felt a slight burn in on his shoulder where the attack had grazed him. She had managed to injure him, she was the first—and she looked smug about it.

The lightning continued to dance, luckily his katana was taking the most of them, like a lightning rod. However, as most of the wires were not all that much higher than his katana stuck in the ground, if he stood, he would become the tallest object, and would undoubtedly get struck. He could probably divert it, but it would hurt.

This was not the girl's power alone. It was a scroll written by some shinobi who knew the lightning element well. The Takigakure kunoichi had activated it, but it was stronger than her lightning.

But why the wires? He could easily charge through them without much difficulty. His question was answered a second later as he felt her begin to apply chakra to the wires. They were *metal* wires, and she had lightning element. The chakra crept through the entire web until Sasuke was surrounded by, essentially, an electric fence, underneath a lightning storm. He stayed lying on the ground for a moment, the wires and the katana taking the bolts of lightning, thinking. If he destroyed the scroll, the lightning bolts would probably subside, as for the wires, if he was careful, he could avoid them without being grazed. On the other hand, if he—

"Don't lie idle!" Michiru shouted in her unnaturally high-pitched voice. She twisted her hand holding the ends of the wires and all of a sudden, the whole web twisted. Sasuke saw in all directions where they were coming, and managed to slip free, unscathed, but he was soon struggling to find more holes in the web through which to escape. All the while, he was getting farther away from her. This wasn't what he had expected. He knew though, just by the way things were going, she had a plan to finish him off. There would probably be some final attack that was meant to incapacitate him. He couldn't let that happen.

There was no other choice. He lashed out with a handful of chidori, grabbing a handful of wires. He felt the clash of the two lightning elements as they fought for dominance, but his was distinctly stronger. He overpowered her chakra and with a fury sent it back her direction, ten times stronger than what she had applied to the wires initially. It was inevitable that she would be electrocuted. A piercing scream shot from her—she had tried to divert it, but it was too strong for her. She dropped the wires, her hand burned badly, her body shocked—he hoped he hadn't stopped her heart.

She was still standing, miraculously, but she was on the verge of passing out. In the last split-second before the wires went slack and

fell, Sasuke sped over the field, his hands a blur of hand signs.

"Katon: Ryuka no Jutsu!" he shouted and aimed at the scroll.

It burned up instantly, and the lightning bolts ceased immediately. Michiru was now on her knees still trying to stand tall; her body was shaking. She glared at him with hateful eyes, clutching her burned hand as she fought to remain conscious.

"D-damn...you..." she cursed, her voice weak, "D-damn..."

She lost consciousness, and Sasuke caught her falling body. She was a tiny thing, and it was almost impossible not to feel sorry for her. After all, she was only a child. Sasuke checked her pulse as Genma declared him the winner. He didn't hear the crowd cheering, and he didn't hear the murmurs of worry. His eyes hardened.

"Her heartbeat is erratic!" he hollered suddenly. Four medics, instead of the usual two, were at his side instantly, descending on the fallen girl. She was removed from his grasp, and he did his best to stay out of the way as they toted her away. Up in the audience, Sasuke was aware of Ino and Sakura leaving their seats—they were probably headed to make sure things were all right. Sakura had told him that if things seemed serious enough, all medics in the audience had to report in. Sasuke was also aware of the Takigakure boy yelling Michiru's name desperately, his chakra signature reflecting the definition of anguished concern. He couldn't leave, not until his turn was done in the arena.

Sasuke retrieved his katana from among the sea of now limp wires, and slowly made his way back to the waiting box. Genma declared a ten-minute recess before the next match in order to clear the wires Michiru had scattered. It would be too disadvantageous for the next fight. Sasuke didn't think it would be too disadvantageous, as he climbed the stairs, not for Yugito at least. She had the grace of a cat.

Said cat-like woman was sitting cross-legged in the booth, facing the doorway. Sasuke raised an eyebrow at her, but then remembered he

was still blindfolded—he took it off and looked at her with colour. The boy Haru was pacing madly around the small box, both of them ignored him. Though Sasuke could sympathize a little. If anything ever happened to Sakura like what he had done to Michiru, he too would be very upset.

"Your shoulder okay? I saw you get hit," Yugito asked, her green eyes trailing to his shoulder.

"Well enough," he answered, "And what about your legs? The way you were walking says to me that they're worse than my shoulder."

"Not anymore," she grinned, "I heal pretty quickly."

Because of Nekomata.

The words were unspoken, but Sasuke knew that was the implication. The Haru boy wasn't listening anyways.

Yugito glanced at him, and then said to Sasuke, "With any luck, he'll wear himself out before we have to fight."

The boy stopped in his pacing, "I am *not* going to wear myself out!"

This was the most assertive Sasuke had seen him yet.

"And *you* ! What did you do to her?!" he hollered, rounding on the Uchiha, "If you've killed her, I'll—"

"She's not dead," Sasuke answered bluntly, "And you'll hear it from a medic yourself. There's one coming to tell us how she's doing."

There was. In fact, it was Sakura who was coming to tell them the news. Sasuke stared back at the Takigakure boy and wished it *would* be good news. He held the boy's gaze a second longer and then went and sat against the wall opposite the railing that looked out over the arena. As Sakura got closer, he closed his eyes and counted in his head.

' *Three...two...one.* '

Sakura cleared her throat; Sasuke opened his eyes and turned them in that direction. He wasn't surprised to see her, of course, but he was a little taken aback by the colour of her hair—a pale blonde, similar to Ino's. It must have been because of the stunt that the idiot Konohamaru pulled. He didn't blame Sakura for wanting to make sure nobody knew that Konohamaru had transformed into *her*. Only the Haru boy didn't know Sakura, so she turned to him and spoke directly to him.

"Hello, I am Haruno Sakura," she said kindly, gently, "I am a medical ninja and it is understood that a member of Oda Michiru's team is present. I've been dispatched to—"

Sakura didn't get to finish. "Is Michiru okay?! What happened to her? Is Risa with her?" the boy practically was clinging to her, desperate for answers.

"It's alright. Michiru-san is fine," Sakura answered reassuringly, "Her heart was affected by the electric shock she received, and shortly after leaving the field, her heart momentarily stopped. We were able to revive her though, and she is being treated so that her recovery rate will accelerate. She is out of danger, and currently Toyotomi Risa is with her. They said they wanted me to tell you to win your next fight."

Instead of looking determined, the Takigakure boy only gulped. Yugito was trying not to look amused. Haru knew he was likely to lose, and Yugito knew it too. The boy muttered an 'I'm glad she's okay' and moved back to the other end of the room, sitting on the floor heavily. Having been freed from the boy's attention, Sakura rounded her own attention on Sasuke.

"As for you," she said, putting her hands on her hip, "What a thing to do to her!"

Sasuke looked away and said nothing. He knew, he knew, he hadn't meant for her heart to stop. He was just glad he didn't kill her.

"She's only a child," Sakura said in a quieter voice, but no less stern, "It was a bit harsh, don't you think?"

"Harsh?" he looked at her with mild disbelief, "Sakura, do you think our world was any less harsh than theirs is?"

She paused, and sighed, "No. I suppose, it's because we're older now, and looking back—"

Sasuke nodded. "Some things aren't just harsh. They're downright cruel," he moved his hand and patted his neck where the curse mark was, "I didn't want to hurt her that badly, but comparatively..."

"Comparatively she's better off than what you or Naruto had to go through, I'll admit that," Sakura acknowledged reluctantly, "And I suppose I should be thanking you. Because you notified the medical staff that her heart beat was erratic, she was already hooked up to the right machines when her heart stopped. You probably kept her from dying."

She wandered over to where he was and slid down the wall to sit next to him. Yugito had gotten up and was leaning against the railing, staring up at the sky. Sasuke heard her mutter something about not wanting to interrupt a couple making up. Sasuke resisted the urge to glare at her back—it wouldn't do anything anyways. He looked at Sakura instead, really looked at her, staring deep in her eyes. The details were still there, they always would be, the only difference now was that he refused to forget them. The only thing throwing him off was the blonde hair, which decidedly did not suit her.

"How are you enjoying the tournament?" he asked her, and she smiled.

"Well enough," Sakura said, "The snacks that Naruto bought were all gone by the third fight. Ino's a nervous eater, and when she gets on

edge—from anticipation or nervousness—she eats a lot, and then Naruto eats a lot already. And then it probably didn't help that Kiba was stealing food from the other side when Naruto wasn't paying attention."

"What is going on around you sounds more interesting than what's going on in the exam," Sasuke commented, smirking slightly.

"Of course not," Sakura said, "I've watched all your fights closely. Though I'm still waiting for you to let loose."

Sasuke just turned away with a smirk on his face, looking past the railing and to the arena below, "Last fight, I promise."

There was a shout from Genma, signifying the recess was over. Yugito glanced at Haru and then looked over her shoulder at Sasuke and Sakura, still leaning against the wall.

"Do your best, Yugito-san," Sakura said sincerely, "You too, Haru-san."

Yugito nodded and smiled before leaping down below. Haru studied the distance below before deciding he preferred the stairs and scuttled off. Sasuke turned his eyes back to Sakura.

"I suppose you should watch this fight," Sakura said, sounding a little disappointed, "so that you know what you'll be up against next match."

"I like surprises," Sasuke answered doing his best at mild humor. Sakura only raised her eyebrows at him.

"You do?" she asked, sounding genuinely surprised.

"No, not at all," Sasuke answered truthfully, "But it'll be more realistic this way."

"If you say so," Sakura answered, looking slightly uncertain. She glanced at the door once before her eyes flicked back to his.

"I say so," he insisted, "Stay. They won't mind. Just don't heal my shoulder, and it'll be fine."

Her face relaxed a little, and she settled herself more comfortably—as comfortably as she could while sitting on a concrete floor. Sasuke put his arm around her shoulders and then touched his forehead to hers briefly, looking her in the eye. Things were good right now, he decided, they were quiet. The Chuunin Exams were almost over, he was as good as assured to be a chuunin, and not only that, but for the time being, it seemed like Sakura's parents were going to leave them alone. Sitting next to her, his arm around her, he felt happy. Everything was perfect—nothing was amiss. There was only one thing nagging at the back of his mind, and that was the issue of whether or not he should kill Itachi. But then Sakura smiled softly, as she grasped his hand and slid her thumb over the back of it, and he couldn't help but put aside his doubts for now. They could wait until later. For now, he would settle for things being perfect.

Being hospitalized was something Nariko was becoming accustomed to. Accident after accident had led her to the Amegakure Hospital, and the nurse who frequented her bedside was now familiar enough with the Rokubi Jinchuuriki to start calling her 'Nariko-chan'. It never occurred to Nariko that the nurse didn't really know what exactly she was.

But even if the trips to the hospital were something Nariko was used to—even growing to expect—she never imagined she would come in as damaged as she had been. It had been over a month and she was still there. Itachi came and saw her everyday, and there was always a man standing in the room with her. Itachi told her that he was there to make sure nothing happened to her while she was getting better. Nariko knew Itachi couldn't be there all the time, but she wished they would find someone else to keep watch over her, like a nurse, or somebody. She felt like the man was a spy for the leader. It didn't help that the man was a different person every three days. She could never see if she *liked* any of them. So Nariko spent

her days with a curtain of suspicion put between her and whomever was her guard.

She could easily ignore him though. She had a nice stack of books, which she had ordered the man to get for her. The only redeeming quality of having someone hanging around *all the time* was that she got to order him around, which was a nice change.

Actually, compared to what she spent her time doing in hospital and what she did back at 'Central Headquarters'—Itachi had called it that—there wasn't much difference between her activities aside from location. And the fact that she was confined to one room and that she was not looking for ways to keep her body weakened. She read mostly, stared out her window with the boring view, practiced her writing, or made origami. She was doing the latter today.

Her fingers were working skillfully with the little square sheets of paper, fold after fold. She was particularly cheerful that day, despite her rather poor circumstances. She was trapped in a hospital recovering from numerous broken ribs, and a couple of crushed vertebrae, waiting for recovery only to be released long enough in order to sustain some other injury. That and she was also waiting to be killed by the very people who took her in. But Nariko, being one of underdeveloped though processing, and childlike mind, never stopped to consider looking at everything as a whole. She was not ignorant about what her fate was, but she was more than happy to let something attract her awareness elsewhere.

' *Itachi-niisama is coming to visit today!*' she sang in her head cheerfully.

Nariko folded a couple more creases in her paper, before making some completing folds. Nariko held up her paper crane in triumph to no one in particular. Paper cranes was what she made most often. And by now, she had probably made as many as five thousand paper cranes. Nariko couldn't even count that high—she would get sick after a hundred or so. But her cranes were almost as good as Flower-chan's, now that she'd made so many; she still couldn't fold

them as fast as Flower-chan though, and she couldn't make the paper fold by itself, even if she had her own chakra now.

Still, she'd like to make it just a *little* bit more interesting. Maybe if she tried, she could improve the crane a bit. She wanted to impress Itachi, she wanted to show him that even though she was getting injured and falling out of windows and stuff, that she could still manage to do things better, improve things, learn.

"Ne, Bodyguard-sama," she said, turning to the man standing stoically at the other side of the room, his back turned towards her, "Can you get me some water? I'm thirsty."

He glanced at her, and then visibly sighed. He wandered away, taking her empty glass with him. She smiled. She wanted her experiment to be a surprise.

Itachi wandered the streets of Amegakure, his hat on his head, keeping most of the rain out of his collar. He was nearly at the hospital where Nariko was, and he was debating whether or not he should tell her that her release date was going to be three days from now.

He didn't know if it was wise to tell her, given her recent behaviour. After Nariko's last stunt, he didn't want to possibly give her three days to plan her next one. At this point in time, Itachi was the only one who suspected that Nariko falling out of the window was intentional. Furthermore, he was beginning to suspect it was an attempt at suicide.

The fall from the second story window had broken three of her ribs, partially crushed two vertebrae, and caused a crack in her skull. If the demon had not been sealed within her, she would have probably died. Additionally, the partially crushed vertebrae could have cause paralysis if the demon did not have the regenerative abilities. Itachi personally could not see the benefit or purpose for reading on a windowsill, and could only conclude that she was trying to kill herself.

Though he didn't understand why she would bother making it look like an accident.

As for the motives behind her attempt at suicide, he could only reach one conclusion, and that was that she had figured out the truth and was trying to end her life before Akatsuki could. But if she was going to kill herself, why go for a second story window? Why not jump from a higher window, or the roof, and be done with it? He had no proof that it wasn't actually an accident, but he was still fairly certain in his hypothesis. Though her mood did not suggest that she was suicidal. She had been her normal self for a long time, the only time he noticed visible behavioral changes was just before they left the hideout in the Land of Earth.

He had asked Konan about Nariko's condition a couple weeks after being admitted to hospital. Konan was relieved of being the head of the infirmary while in Amegakure, but all medical reports of members were sent to her regardless. Konan had told him that aside from the injuries sustained, there was nothing anomalous about her health, mentally or physically. Konan's brow had darkened a little then, and she added that the number of injuries was starting to cause some deterioration of her overall physical well-being. Though it was not bad right now, she said, if Nariko's clumsiness wasn't kept in check, it could cause trouble for the sealing later. Though she didn't say it, Itachi had a feeling that Konan was also thinking along the same lines as him. Of course the both of them knew it would probably be best to contain this problem by sealing Nariko away quickly and be done with it, but neither of them mentioned it, and then Pain never came for her.

Itachi's only real concern was that Nariko might possibly know the truth, but again, he had no way to see if Nariko actually knew what was going to happen to her. And he was not about to ask. But if Nariko *did* know, and she was creating these accidents on purpose in some twisted means of killing herself... No, she must not be trying to kill herself, because it could so easily have been done other times. No what if she was trying to hurt herself but keep herself alive—

There was a flare of chakra that came up from the direction of the hospital. Flares of chakra were not uncommon from that direction, because of the medical ninjutsu that came from that area, but this was much greater than anything that was normal. Furthermore, Itachi knew that chakra—it was the Rokubi's chakra.

Itachi ran.

Whatever was going on at the hospital, he couldn't guess. But something either was killing Nariko, or was causing her trauma or fear. The signature was behaving strangely too—it wasn't constant like it had been previously. This time, it was erratic.

Itachi used the speed the Uchiha were renown for, and soon was within sight of the hospital. A few more seconds and he was at the base of the building. There were some startled looks as he seemingly appeared out of nowhere in front of the few citizens standing outside of the hospital; he didn't stop, but nor did he enter. It would be too slow to rush through the people, equipment, and staff. Instead he took a leap up and landed neatly on the fire escape on the outside of the building, on the floor that Nariko was kept on. There were gasps and murmurs from below, as people began questioning his identity—"Was that one of Akatsuki?" "That was Uchiha Itachi wasn't it?" "I don't know; he was too fast."—but their words were lost on him as he flew in the door.

There weren't many people in the hallway, but there was one person who Itachi instantly recognized. Konan was coming from the other direction, rushing just as much as him. They made eye contact and she sent him a concerned look. He nodded. She must have been collecting some reports, because he could think of no other reason that she was here at the hospital. The both of them reached Nariko's door at the same time; Konan pulled the door handle down while Itachi rammed his shoulder into the door. Whatever was on the other side of the door, Itachi had to prepare to face it.

But what Konan and Itachi saw was something neither of them had expected, and thus were unduly prepared for it.

Nariko was sitting on her bed, her hands held up as a small flock of paper cranes circled around her head. Itachi couldn't fathom what he was feeling when he saw the image of her, sitting cross-legged there, on the bed, and a smile on her face. Her eyes were alight when she turned to look at them, and he saw her lips move, but he didn't hear what she said. He was just struck with something that he hadn't felt since...since Sasuke had showed him the first ninjutsu he had ever performed. Whatever he felt, he knew he wasn't allowed to feel it—he knew he shouldn't.

Beside him, Konan breathed a sigh of relief, and approached Nariko's bedside. She said something to Nariko, but again, he seemed unable to hear anything right now. The paper cranes slowly fell one by one as Nariko's concentration waned. And it wasn't until the last one fell that Itachi seemed to be able to shut those feelings back where they belonged.

A/N: Corrections made to any of my fabricated ninjutsu that have been translated (by me) into Japanese would be greatly appreciated. I think I am doing most of it right, grammar-wise, but as Japanese is a language I am in the process of learning, I can never be certain. Yoroshiku onegaishimasu! (bows low)

HATE FIGHT SCENES! And damn, I know I'll have to write at least *one* more after the Chuunin Exam arc is over. (cries)

Chapter 60

A/N: Good gods! Sixty freaking chapters. Compiled length of Blind up to chapter fifty-nine, minus author notes and adding a title page: eight hundred and fifteen; word count: three hundred eighty one thousand, two hundred twenty six words. Estimated total number of pages at finish: one thousand and two. Estimated word count: x.x

A reviewer said the following: "[Itachi] and Konan should just kidnap Nariko and run away into the sunset somewhere and be one messed up, yet happy, family. That's a happy ending. :D" This has my stamp of approval. Though it's not going to go that way, sadly. T_T

Disclaimer: Another twenty chapters means another disclaimer renewal. I do not own Naruto. For if I did, there would not be a huge crater where there shouldn't be and everyone would still be alive. By the way, Nagato, you're an asshole.

Chapter Sixty: Sasuke's Decision

It was the last fight, the final battle of the Chuunin Exam—the final hurdle, the last challenge. Sasuke left Sakura's side as he went to the railing of the viewing box, peering down below; Genma was declaring the victory to Nii Yugito while the Takigakure shinobi was being taken away by some flocking medics. Yugito didn't bother moving, but instead looked up at Sasuke, her face almost taunting, daring him to come down. A smirk pulled at the corner of his mouth, and with about the same amount of grace as Yugito, Sasuke leapt over the railing and landed down below.

Thunderous cheers filled the stadium as Yugito and Sasuke faced each other, but to Sasuke, it was like the sound had been turned off. He was excited for this fight, he knew he didn't have to hold back, he

knew Yugito was probably the only challenging opponent in this arena. He could feel the palms of his hands tingling with anticipation.

He only saw Genma's lips move, when he told them to face one another and bow, the voice was completely gone. He saw Yugito's cat-like grin spread over her face, and then green eyes narrow in an analytical manner. The two of them bowed slowly, neither breaking gaze with one another. Slowly, each one eased into a fighting stance. Sasuke reached for the blindfold tucked in his belt.

"Are you going to insult me with that thing, too?" Yugito asked, nodding her chin towards the blindfold. Her voice came to his awareness like a far away sound: distant, almost unheard.

Sasuke gave her a crooked grin as he tied it around his eyes for the third and final time, "We'll see if you're good enough to force me to remove it."

"Careful, Uchiha," Yugito warned, her voice a bit clearer this time, "You sound a tad on the over confident side."

"Perhaps," he shrugged, "Prove me wrong."

And even though Genma had given the order to begin, the fight only started now. At the same instant, both Yugito and Sasuke charged forwards, their speed matched. They met in the center of the field; the resounding clash of weapons marked the pause in their movement as Sasuke's katana and Yugito's kunai met. No quicker had they blocked each other's attacks then they moved again, and again the clash of metal rang out.

Sasuke was very impressed with Yugito's speed. She was matching his speed fairly well, lagging behind only slightly, and each of her attacks was well placed. He studied her closely to watch her habits, to see if she made any indications in regards to what she was going to do next. They both came in for another attack, and with a flick of his wrist he used his katana to disarm her—the kunai flew out of her hand, but before it landed, she was already executing a reverse

punch while his katana was out of the way. Sasuke blocked it with his right hand grabbing her wrist and stepping to the side. Her momentum caused her to soar past him, but she recovered the last second and tried to sweep him from underneath his feet with her trailing leg. At the last second he managed to avoid it, but it forced him to leap back away from her.

Yugito didn't leave him alone for an instant; she was right after him, and Sasuke found himself a little annoyed. Here he was, as good as running away from her. He hadn't launched a single attack at her that she had needed to block. He held his ground. She came in with new weapons retrieved from her kunai pouch, one kunai in each hand. Each kunai came darting in, but he soon picked out her openings, and started darting his katana in between her moving arms. He used his right hand to block anything that got past his katana. Soon, Yugito was the one backing up, as she tried to evade his attacks.

In close combat, they seemed to be fairly well matched, and at this rate, they would get nowhere. Yugito must have been thinking the same thing, because they both leapt backwards at the same time. Neither of them relaxed their stances, but both were breathing hard from the exertion. Numerous attacks ran through Sasuke's head as he contemplated what he should do next. So far in all the fights so far, he'd let his opponent attack first—partially because he was much better than they were and he wanted to offer them the advantage of a pre-emptive strike. Here, he knew it could be risky to let Yugito strike first, so he would have to be careful.

He saw Yugito start to use hand signs. He knew she was fire element, and judging by the first two hand signs he could already guess about five fire ninjutsu that she could use with those first two hand signs. He started doing hand signs himself: snake, sheep, monkey, boar, horse, tiger...

"Katon: Gokakyu no jutsu!" he and Yugito hollered at the same time.

Sasuke could not see fire with his senses, not very well, only little distortions in the signals he was receiving from returning chakra. But

the heat and fire was so intense that Yugito's form was completely blurred—he could not make her out at all. He could tell that his technique was stronger though, and soon, it wiped out Yugito's fireball entirely. He could only sense by her chakra signature that she had leapt away; he could not see her again until she came out from behind the fireball. Her expression looked frustrated. But, still undeterred, she made more hand signs.

Sasuke could pick out what technique it was; he was still blowing his fireball, and he turned his head towards her, as more fire rained down from her. Again she was forced to dodge. Sasuke ended his technique as Yugito retreated into the trees on the far side of the field, where they were not burning. Sasuke wasted no time in smoking her out; using Katon: Hosenka no jutsu, the bases of the trees caught on fire. Which perhaps wasn't the best of ideas. She came shooting out towards him her hands extended and weaponless. It was only as he dodged to the side and felt the heat rush by that he realized her hands were ablaze.

He decided to counter her elemental weapons with one of his own. He matched her flaming hands with his katana charged with Chidori Nagashi. It became a very interesting fight after that. He was doing his best to avoid being touched by her hands while attacking her, while she was trying to do the exact same thing with his katana. The darting about was getting complicated. And the Yugito started doing some more hand signs—it was only when her hands were put together in signs that Sasuke could see the effect of the fire with his chakra senses. As for the technique, he recognized another sequence. It was another fire ninjutsu—one with an explosive force.

Sasuke knew at point blank range he would get hurt pretty badly, and he had no other choice but to get away. He leapt back just as she finished the technique, but it was more powerful than he expected it. There was a resounding blast and a searing heat followed in Sasuke's wake. It didn't burn him, but he was still too close for comfort. Earth and dust flew everywhere. He could see Yugito through the bits of dust, but it created a snowy image with his

senses, the tiny dust particles between the two of them. He could see her moving her hands again, and it looked like she was going to try again. And Sasuke couldn't allow that.

His hands flew faster than hers—horse, monkey, rabbit, ox, bird, rat, sheep...

"Katon: Shippuu shounetsujigoku no jutsu!"

The huge walls of fire rose around him, spinning, swirling in a maelstrom of fire. He expanded the fire's walls outwards, using Yugito's chakra signature as a guide. As the wall of fire approached her, he knew that she would either have to give up, or use some clever ninjutsu in order to escape. He pushed the walls outwards, waiting over the roaring flames for some indication that Yugito would surrender. But none came. In fact, even though he was pushing the wall so that expanded over the majority of the field, Yugito seemed to be unhurt. She was definitely engulfed by the flames, there was no doubting it, but...

Nekomata's chakra flickered. Then it started fluctuating. Sasuke held his ground, but then he felt the fire in his control behave strangely. Where Yugito stood, his fire was now starting to rotate around her, against the flow of the hurricane of fire. Then he felt it start to disappear—no, disappear wasn't the right word, it felt more like... Like the fire was being... *devoured* .

He let the walls of fire fall, and Yugito was revealed standing not too far away from him. She was standing with her arms hanging limp by her side, her head hung. Sasuke could feel Nekomata's chakra around her, in a sort of cocoon—and he recognized the element that accompanied it: it was dark element chakra.

Yugito looked up at him then, a smirk pulling at the corner of her mouth. She looked pleased, "Well, it's been a while since I've been pushed this far, Sasuke. Congratulations. It only gets harder."

Sasuke wasn't sure of what he was going to make of this, he had no idea what had changed, but he figured she was tapping into Nekomata's power somehow. And then Yugito charged at him, her hands flying in a multitude of hand signs. This time, Sasuke didn't recognize what technique she was using. And it was only when Yugito was almost right in front that he realized what was coming. It was when she grabbed the blade of his katana with her bare hands that he had an idea of what it was. The Chidori Nagashi was gone—the fire in her palm was gone too, instead, he felt a chakra there that seemed to suck all other forms of chakra into it.

The chakra that he used to see with his senses was starting to get pulled towards it too, distorting his perception. He knew he had to get away from that hand or go completely blind. He leapt back and the distortion faded a little, though where her hand was, he couldn't see that clearly. Yugito used more hand signs, and the fire came back, he only knew because he could feel the heat from where he stood—it was hotter, more powerful and this time he could see it with his senses. Her hand wasn't even cut from when he pulled the blade from her hand.

A taijutsu fight ensued. Yugito used a combination of her chakra-eating dark element chakra and the super-heated fire, and Sasuke found that it was difficult for retaliation when the dark element chakra tugged at the corner of his senses. He ran through his options in his head as he fought, contemplating what he could do. He could remove his blindfold, or he could try summoning some snakes. He could also try to use some of his forbidden techniques, but he wasn't sure if that would look good to the judges.

All the while that he was thinking, he and Yugito ran about the field, attacking and counterattacking one another. Things were definitely getting to a more destructive level. Trees were on fire, the earth was exploded and broken, missed hits and kicks were breaking up the landscape like it was nothing, and even the walls of the stadium were beginning to show some wear and tear. Ninjutsu still flew back and forth—Sasuke discovered that whatever the technique in

Yugito's hand did, it couldn't deflect huge attacks, like Gokakyu no jutsu, and simply did her best to dodge.

Finally, it was time for Sasuke to execute his course of action. Yugito's speed was up since she started using Nekomata's chakra in addition to her own, but Sasuke knew that if he waited until the right moment, he would be able to get around behind her. He blew another burst of Gokakyu no jutsu at her, and when she dodged, he zipped behind her. He raised his hand and lightly tapped the back of her head.

There was a pause from everyone as they watched as Nii Yugito simply fell to the ground, unconscious. As for Sasuke, it looked like he had stumbled for only a moment just after he touched Yugito. But only Sasuke knew what had happened—he had touched Yugito's head to put her in a genjutsu, but when he did so, something else had happened. The moment he had touched her, a reverse current had flowed into him. He had felt the familiar sensation of falling, and then he was surrounded by darkness. Before him was the image of a large cat, engulfed in black and purple flames. It stared him down, and hissed loudly—it looked like it would devour him.

There was only a moment's hesitation on Sasuke's end and then: "Kai!"

He managed to catch his footing before he actually fell to the ground. He stood for a moment, panting, certain in his victory. He had won, and the exam was finally over—

Yugito's sweeping hand knocked his feet out from under him; he landed on his back. Instantly, his hand took his katana and pointed it at Yugito's neck as her kunai went for his. There was a beat of silence and they both stared at each other, both lying on the ground, a weapon threatening their lives. It was Yugito who first broke her stony expression. After that moment, she started to giggle, and the giggle turned into a laugh, and then Sasuke found that he was grinning too.

"Both Uchiha Sasuke and Nii Yugito are no longer able to fight!" Genma declared, "The match has ended in a tie."

Sasuke removed his katana as Yugito lowered her kunai. The both of them got to their feet, and dusted themselves off. Sasuke untied the blindfold and then looked at the state of his clothes. He was covered with grit and grime and sweat, and his white blindfold was grey. The two of them returned to their starting points, and bowed to each other. Sasuke looked over his shoulder to where Sakura still stood in the waiting box; she waved at him and he found an affectionate grin tugging at the corner of his mouth.

The Chuunin Exam was finally over.

"About thirty-five genin participated in this exam. Twenty made it to the Forest of Death, and only nine survived, and of those nine, only eight participated in the finals. And of those eight, you are the only three people who became Chuunin," Tsunade said, her voice serious.

Seated at the table in the Hokage's office were all the Exam's judges, the Raikage, and the Hokage herself. They all looked rather professional, and the Raikage looked difficult to take seriously as usual, though it was hard to say what he was really thinking.

"Congratulations, Oda Michiru."

The girl looked flushed and pleased, if not all together happy. She still looked pretty sour in the face anyways.

"Congratulations, Nii Yugito."

Yugito seemed absolutely speechless, her face was stony and blank, but not because of lack of emotions. Her eyes flashed towards the Raikage, but she didn't say anything, she only looked happy, and perhaps a little smug.

"Congratulations, Uchiha Sasuke."

A smirk spread across the face of the said Uchiha, "Hn."

With uncertain thoughts, Sasuke perched himself on a roof in an uncrowded pocket of Konoha. The fights were finished, the Chuunin Exam was finally over, and that morning, he and Sakura, along with Naruto and Hinata, bid farewell to Yugito as she left to return home to Kumogakure, a Chuunin vest proudly on her back.

"Write often," she warned him, as if there would be some consequences if he did not.

He assured her that he would, and with a final wave she marched off out of the Konoha gates, her head held high, a perfect example of a person who had been beaten down by others but had risen out of the debris and could march forwards happily. It was with dignity that Yugito left Konoha. She knew where she was going.

But now that he was Chuunin, the question inevitably arose: what would he do now? Unlike Yugito he did not know where he was going. The direction in which he was headed, the direction he had been following, still lay clearly before him, but the path was branched. There were choices to make. He still did not know if he should continue his path of revenge.

He sighed and closed his eyes, lying back on the tin roof. The winter wind was getting warmer, and he was not entirely without comfort in the afternoon air. Internally was another matter. The words of his mother, that so frequently ran through his head, came to mind yet again. And then he was reminded of something else—something Yugito had asked him as they were returning back from the Hokage tower, after receiving their Chuunin vests.

"Hey, Sasuke," Yugito said slowly, her hands in her vest pockets, "I've wanted to ask you this for a while now..."

"What?" he answered, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye.

She turned to him, and looked at him seriously, "The price of revenge is high."

Sasuke stiffened a little.

"What did it cost you?"

He looked away for a moment, his eyes trained on the sky. He was hoping that in the silence that stretched out that she would take back her question, or say something along the lines of it being too sensitive a question to have asked. But she did not. Yugito patiently waited, seeming determined to get an answer out of him.

He sighed. "...My sight," he replied at last.

"I see," she said quietly, "Actually, that explains a lot. Thank you for telling me."

They hadn't spoken about it again. Yet the short exchange had left Sasuke with a lot to think about. The price of revenge was high, and yet he had managed to get back what he had been charged—his sight. Was he willing to risk something else, just as important, to pay for the chance for vengeance again? He didn't know; he didn't want to think about it. He didn't know what he wanted anymore. He wanted Itachi to pay, yes. But would he be the one who was to deliver that judgment? He remembered Sakura's words to him, in October, the night after they had been trapped in the teahouse.

Whose choice it, really, to decide who gets to live or die? Ours? God's? You'll always have to vindicate yourself to those who don't agree with your decision, or else to them you will have blood on your hands.

And then again, his mother's words.

It does not satisfy the soul to live for revenge.

He sighed and closed his eyes, lying back on the tin roof. The winter wind was getting warmer, and he was not entirely without comfort in the afternoon wind. The weather was too nice right now to think about such bleak things. But yet his thoughts would not rest; they ran frequently through his head. He knew Itachi could not live—he was always a threat. But he knew that revenge was not what his mother wanted—he didn't much care about the state of his soul; Orochimaru had probably ruined it enough already. He opened his eyes again, and stared hard at the wispy clouds of the chilly afternoon. If he was not going to take revenge, then what would he do about Itachi? Leave it to fate? Or God? Or whoever? It was obvious that he could not live, but Sasuke knew it would break his mother's heart if he was the one who killed him.

But there was no guarantee that Itachi would be killed off by someone else. No, he would have to do it, whatever he was going to do. But for now, he did not see the need to do anything about Itachi. For the time being, nothing seemed out of place. As long as things remained as they were, he was not pressured to make a decision. He knew he would have to decide eventually, but today was not that day. He didn't want it to be that day, so he wouldn't let it be that day.

He sat up again and glanced at a nearby clock on a building. It was time to head home. He had told Sakura he was going out, and asked her if wanted anything from the grocery store. She told him that she didn't think anything was needed. She hadn't asked where he was going. There was probably something in the way he had said he was going out that implied he just wanted to be by himself—Sakura, ever perceptive, did not ask. He was grateful.

Months ago, when she had demanded he make her understand him, he had been unable to do so. He did not know how to express himself in a way to convey what he felt, he had never wanted to before. Yet somehow, as time passed, they grew to understand. Without words, or actions, they just knew.

When he first was brought back to Konoha, he had been doubtful of ever being able to resume a normal life. He hadn't expected one; he

was without sight, he was a criminal, charged with community service of all things, and *Sakura* was his caregiver. Things couldn't have seemed more terrible for him at the time. He would be treated like dirt, interrogated, mistrusted, hated, judged. Sakura would probably be annoying beyond tolerance, he would be unable to stand her and then someone else would be sent instead to be his twenty-four hour guard. That was what he expected.

He never guessed that Sakura would support him, train him, put up with him—instead of him having to put up with her—and tolerate the controversy from her family. He never imagined that they would form a bond much greater than the one they had before he left. Here she was, almost nine months later, still living under the same roof with him, sleeping next to him, with so much trust and faith in him, holding him through his nightmares, even if they were now few and very far between.

Returning to Konoha, he never imagined he would be accepted by Naruto, even though he had tried to kill him. He never expected to be trusted enough to do missions, take the Chuunin Exam. How could he have even guessed that he would be wearing a chuunin vest proudly on his back, even as he moved rooftop to rooftop this very moment? He felt a small half-smile tug at the corner of his mouth. He wouldn't ever give this up. He had had his second chance, he was not going to waste it. Itachi's face flashed briefly across his mind. He inwardly corrected himself. He wasn't going to waste it, if he could help it.

About ten minutes away from the Uchiha Manor, he sensed the chakra signature of an unlikely individual. Haruno Kanaye's signature was coming his direction, but he didn't really give it much thought. For starters, his mind was absorbed elsewhere, in a constant conflict that demanded attention from all other things. Secondly, it wasn't the first time he'd run into Kanaye in town. Sometime he passed Kanaye when he was out and about, but between his training, and Kanaye's missions, it was infrequent. He

didn't really consider this time any different until Kanaye spotted him from the street below and called out to him.

"Oi, Emo Prince!"

Sasuke halted and stood on the rooftop, looking down into the street. Kanaye's face was not as it usually was. Instead of its usual laid-back, fun loving expression, a serious and concerned look was on his face. Sasuke didn't say anything, but wondered instead why those royal-blue eyes were looking at him with such solemnity.

"Can I talk to you?" Kanaye asked, his expression unchanging.

Slowly, Sasuke nodded, "...Sure."

Kanaye leapt up off the street, and landed nimbly next to Sasuke. "There's a park two streets over," he said, "Let's talk there."

Sasuke knew the park, it was the one where Sakura had first described the sunset to him. Wordlessly they moved locations, and as they did so, Sasuke studied the jounin's back. He was acutely aware of his grim demeanor, and it was clear that Kanaye was not himself—the playful banter that usually occurred when they met was skipped entirely. His mouth was firm, and his eyes—while not entirely hard—were stern. When they arrived at the park, Kanaye indicated towards a park bench.

"Sit, please," he said, his voice sounding reluctant and almost weary.

"I'd prefer to stand," Sasuke replied.

Kanaye smiled wryly, "Right. Sometimes I forget what you're like. And I suppose psychological methods wouldn't work on you anyways."

"What?"

"You know, it's that old tactic—I make you sit down, and I stay standing. Because I'm taller I'm overshadowing you and it's

supposed to make me look superior and scary," Kanaye answered with a shrug, "That sort of thing."

Sasuke doubted he could ever find Haruno Kanaye intimidating or 'scary'. He was more concerned with *why* he would want to come across that way.

"What did you bring me here for?" Sasuke asked, crossing his arms impatiently.

Kanaye's weariness disappeared and instead was replaced with something akin to anger, "I want to talk to you about Sakura."

He should have guessed—there could hardly be anything else that Kanaye would want to talk to him about. "Does she know about this?" he asked—he could guess the answer already.

"No," Kanaye replied tersely, "It'd probably piss her off."

"Then what? Talk already," Sasuke said, also beginning to guess what this was about.

"I want to talk to you about why Sakura is still living with you," Kanaye said bluntly, "I don't know what exactly you said to Dad in order to let it happen, but I thought by now she'd be home, what with the exam being over and everything. Why is she still there?"

"An answer of 'because she wants to be' won't satisfy you will it?" Sasuke answered, he was beginning to get tired of people being so against him and Sakura living together.

"No, it won't," Kanaye said, setting his jaw, "As I understood it, she was only staying during the Chuunin Exam in order to restore your Sharingan. And as I hear from my friends who were actually in town during the Exam, you never used it once. Putting the pieces together, it seems that you never actually managed to get it back."

"You don't know that," Sasuke said, a warning tone in his voice.

"Then show it to me, right now," Kanaye demanded, crossing his arms, "I'm waiting."

Sasuke did nothing. He clenched his jaw and looked away. No, he did not have his Sharingan. Sakura hadn't even tried to restore it during training. He knew the chances were unlikely. It had been a less than one percent chance when he was sightless, and with his sight he figured it might become a ten percent probability of its return. It was still a small chance. Of course he was not going to tell any of this to Kanaye.

"I thought so," Kanaye said stonily, "Was it a lie? No, not a lie, but is it a statistic impossibility? Can you even *hope* of getting your Sharingan back?"

"I don't know why you would care," Sasuke answered coldly.

"Because it's the only thing that's keeping my sister under your roof instead of her own roof!" Kanaye exclaimed with exasperation, "She told everyone she would be out of your house in a couple months, but here you are. It's been what? Nine months?"

Sasuke glared at him then. Kanaye was beating around the bush, he wasn't saying what was really on his mind, he was trying to imply it. Sasuke hated it when people implied things; he wanted to be told in a straightforward manner.

"Say it to my face, Haruno Kanaye," he said in a deadly voice, "Say to me what you're really thinking, what you're actually worried about."

"Fine! I'm afraid I'm come home one day, Sakura'll be sitting at our kitchen table, and then with a frightened look and a trembling voice, she's going to tell all of us she's pregnant," Kanaye answered candidly, his eyes glaring back.

Sasuke regarded Sakura's older brother coldly, "Of all of your family, I have always believed that you were the one who trusted me the most."

Kanaye looked like he was frustrated with finding an answer. "I like you, Sasuke. I really do. Sure, you're cold, and distant, and you can't take a joke at all, but you're a decent guy. But even you, an infamous Uchiha, is still human. I know that if I had to live under the same roof as Inuzuka Hana for nine months, *I'd* be tempted. But Inuzuka Hana isn't afraid to smack me upside the head if I'm being stupid. Sakura on the other hand loves you heart and soul, and probably wouldn't be able to say no even if she wanted to."

"I'm not like you," Sasuke emphasized, "I haven't been 'tempted'. And you should know that Sakura isn't that kind of person."

He wasn't tempted. He had never been tempted. He was not the type of person to take advantage of a woman; the very suggestion that he might do something of the sort deeply angered him. He was willing to admit that Sakura was beautiful and physically appealing, but he was not one to betray her trust, nor did he want to. Sasuke already knew that Sakura loved him with every fibre of her being, but the only time she had ever considered doing something was the morning they met Tokugawa Manzo, and she hadn't followed through with kissing him. And then there was the teahouse incident—again, he hadn't been tempted. And what about night after night beside Sakura? It was nothing more than soft crooning lullabies in the night as she held him. There was no temptation there, only...he did not know how to describe it.

"You can tell me that, Uchiha," Kanaye retorted, "but you're not exactly helping your case when the room Sakura was staying in is totally nixed off the house."

Sasuke was confused for a moment, but then realized that Kanaye was referring to Itachi's room, which Sakura's parents thought she was sleeping in. Sasuke wasn't sure how exactly Kanaye would have found out about this, but he wouldn't put it past the platinum-haired jounin to go poking around the Uchiha Manor when Sasuke wasn't home.

"It used to be my brother's room," Sasuke said with patience; he didn't like having to talk about Itachi in general, but he especially didn't like speaking of him with people he didn't know all that well, "As you've probably heard, I don't particularly like my brother. It was something I've wanted done for a while, and Sakura was kind enough to hire people to take the room out of the house."

"Yeah, but Dad tells me she was staying in your room," Kanaye answered, "again."

So it was back to Sakura's father again. Sasuke found his dislike for the man increase yet again—just when he thought he could dislike anyone any more without actually hating them.

"The room was removed when I was in the Forest of Death," Sasuke answered stonily, "I wasn't even home then. There are plenty of other rooms in the house that Sakura can stay in."

"So you're saying she's still in your room now?" Kanaye asked incredulously.

"I don't know what makes you assume that," Sasuke growled, knowing what Kanaye said was perfectly true. Sakura had never left his room, but he was never going to let Sakura's family know.

"Fine, fair enough, but the thing is, she shouldn't even be in your house anymore!" Kanaye insisted, "Sakura was certain you'd get annoyed with her and throw her out. But even if you aren't in love with her yet, it's obvious you don't hate her now."

By now, Sasuke was getting quite fed up. Lately it seemed that Sakura's family was unhappy with her living with him, yet she on the other hand seemed perfectly happy. The general consensus seemed to be that nobody knew why Sakura was there, while he himself didn't even know why he wanted her to stay so badly. But he just felt that she had to stay, and she wanted to. That was enough for him. Everyone in Sakura's family had accosted him now save for her mother, though Sasuke knew it was simply because she was too

polite to demand her daughter back from him. They all seemed ill at ease with things, and he was tired of it.

"You seem so certain that things around my house are indecent, bordering on inappropriate. You accuse me of possibly being tempted to pursue your sister, and are afraid that I might possibly impregnate her," Sasuke said angrily, "If you are so certain that this is the case, then come and see for yourself. You and your family *will* join us for dinner, so that you *know* how things are."

Kanaye was silent for a moment. He seemed to be seriously considering it, and then finally, he looked at Sasuke. "Alright. I know it's not me who really decides if it's okay for Sakura to be at your place. So, if you manage to convince my dad things are okay...then I'll leave you alone. But that's only if you manage to make my dad okay with things. And I promise you that won't be easy."

Sasuke knew all right that it wouldn't be easy, but he wasn't going to let that stop him. He had issued the challenge, now he had to rise up to it and succeed. If Sakura wanted to stay, he would let her stay, if Sakura wanted to leave, he wouldn't stop her. But he was not going to have her family forcibly remove her, and he wasn't going to send her away either. He didn't know why this was so important to him, but it didn't matter now.

"I'll see you tomorrow evening," Sasuke snapped, "Six o'clock. Don't be late."

And with that, he spun on his heel and left.

"You told them to what?" Sakura asked incredulously, following Sasuke as he moved around the house.

"I invited them to dinner," Sasuke replied curtly.

Sakura could tell Sasuke was not in a good mood. He had briefly explained to her his run-in with Kanaye, and Sakura was

apprehensive about it. Not only did her family want her home again, but now they were coming over for dinner—tomorrow night. She couldn't understand what had brought this on.

" *You* invited them? Or did Kanaye invite them?" she asked, as Sasuke wandered out through the back door, his katana in hand.

"I invited them," he confirmed with her, opening the door to where his parents had died.

He faltered a moment in the doorway and Sakura almost crashed into him. She held her head in surprise as Sasuke went to the weapons cabinet at the back of the room, deliberately avoiding the middle of the floor. He opened it and carefully put his katana away. She looked at his back disbelievingly.

"What are you hoping to accomplish by that?" Sakura asked, "They're against it. And even if you can momentarily satisfy my father tomorrow evening—which, as Kanaye said, won't be easy—they'll become dissatisfied down the road and demand me home again. How long are you planning on prolonging the inevitable?"

He looked over his shoulder at her, and she was surprised by the sharpness in his look, "That sounded almost like you wanted to leave."

"Well, I don't," Sakura answered, "But they *will* keep asking and asking until you relent and I go home. How long are you going to try and stall that?"

"Until you yourself decide you want to go," Sasuke answered, turning again and making his way back to the doorway. She stepped aside to let him out and then continued to follow him, "I say when you leave, and I say that you are dismissed when you no longer want to be here."

Sakura couldn't respond right away. She knew what she wanted to answer to him, but she didn't know if he would agree with it. It

caused her heart to skip a beat when he told her that she could leave when she wanted. She loved him so much, and yet despite all things that had happened, even though they had lived together for so long, he still didn't want her out. Sasuke cared about her, she knew, but she didn't feel that it was in a romantic way, but it was close enough, it was close enough for her. Even if he loved her as a friend, it was still love, right?

"But, Sasuke," she said slowly as they were in the house again, Sasuke hanging up his chuunin vest in the hall closet, "You know that I love you...and it's because of that that I don't want to leave."

"I know," he replied, turning away from the closet and staring her down. She looked away from him, unable to meet his gaze. She didn't want to see his face when she finished her sentence.

"What if I told you that I never wanted to leave?" she asked quietly, "That I never wanted to go home, that I would rather spend the rest of my life living with you until the day I died?"

Instantly she wished she could take back some of her words. They were all true, every last one. It was true that she wanted to stay by his side until the day she died, but she didn't know if he wanted the same. He probably didn't. After all, he didn't love her the same way she loved him. Spending the rest of her life with him would be too much, she knew. She only wished she could withdraw her words because she didn't want to hear him say it—she didn't want to hear him say that it was too long, that she would have to leave before then.

He didn't answer, which was almost worse than what she was scared to hear him say. Was he thinking it over? Was he actually imagining what it would be like if she actually did stay with him forever? She wanted to, but that was unrealistic even to her ears. She knew she would have to leave one day, it was inevitable, despite what she was hoping. Her family would win, and she would go home. She, Sasuke, and Naruto would be Team Seven again. It would be like nothing had ever happened. She and Sasuke would

resume their lives like they were just teammates. The close moments they shared would just go away, like petals in the wind.

Staying at the Uchiha Manor was not only important to her because she was beside Sasuke, tending to him, taking care of him, being with him. It was not only important to her because she loved him. She could live at home and still love him. But it was when she lived here, at the manor, when he held her at night, when he stood beside her too, cooking, training, walking, anything, that she felt that maybe he could love her too. That maybe the line between friendship and love was blurred enough that he could still think of her as a friend yet love her much more than that.

Her eyes snapped back to him when he took her hand in his, brushing his thumb over the back of her hand. She felt lost in his eyes again with the look he was giving her; there were hundreds of thoughts flying behind those obsidian eyes, yet none of them were readable to her.

"If you want to stay here forever," Sasuke started, a gentle smirk playing at the corner of his mouth, "then we will have a lot of stalling to throw in your parents direction."

She looked down, and nodded. It wasn't a 'no' but she couldn't feel that it was a 'yes'. She suppressed a sigh; that was the way it was with Sasuke, never giving a clear answer. Doing her best to mask her unhappiness she looked up at him with a small smile.

"I suppose you're right," she said, trying to sound as genuine as she could. It wasn't working so well, "I guess I should start moving my futon and other things to the study in order to keep appearances up."

"I'll help," Sasuke stated.

She nodded and turned to head towards the bedroom. But before she could get far, Sasuke had pulled gently on her hand, and then come up behind her. He hugged her from behind, gently, and Sakura felt like her heart had stopped completely.

"Sakura," he said quietly, "I trust you."

It was late evening when Sasuke entered the graveyard. The moon was pale in the still slightly blue sky, and there were only a couple of stars in the sky. There was nobody else in the graveyard; he was alone. He walked the familiar path through the tall white tombstones until he reached two in particular that stood somewhere near the middle. The two names that were carved into them could just be seen in the pale moonlight and the fading daylight. Uchiha Fugaku and Uchiha Mikoto.

"Okaasan, Otousan," he murmured quietly and then knelt down on the brown grass in front of them, "It's been a while since I've visited. I'm sorry."

He looked over to the tombstone of his father and then that of his mother. He could feel a heavy feeling in his chest as he stared at them. He missed them so much, even though his mother had come and said goodbye, he still felt like a part of himself was missing whenever he came to this place. People who never should have died now lay here, resting peacefully forever, leaving him behind. He felt alone here.

"I wanted to let Otousan that I passed the Chuunin Exam," he muttered quietly to the silent stones, his eyes averted to the ground, speaking like his father was actually present, "I'm sorry it took so long. Itachi passed it at a younger age than me, and he probably did better than I did, too. The reason why it took this long is because... well..."

He trailed off. Even though he was completely alone, and he could sense nobody nearby, he never liked expressing his feelings out loud. He glanced up at the tombstone, looking at the deeply-carven lettering.

"I made some mistakes..." he said quietly, "And I had to fix them, and pay for them first. It probably wasn't something you wanted of

your child, but..."

He was silent for a bit longer. The wind blew gently and he felt it on his back, like there was a gentle comforting hand being placed on his shoulder. He knew that if his father had still been alive that day, and he had performed the atrocities that he had, his father would have been ashamed of his son's behaviour. His father had always expected the best from his children, yet he had done something that would have utterly disappointed his father. He felt deep shame.

But it had been for them, to avenge them. No, that was not true... They didn't need vengeance, they were happy now, right? His mother had said so. The concept of vengeance had been for himself, he had betrayed Konoha to avenge the clan for nobody else but himself. He knew his mother did not want him to kill Itachi. And his father, his father would not be proud of him if he did so either.

Would his father say: 'as expected of my child', if he killed Itachi? Would avenging the clan have made his father proud of him? Would his father want to be avenged? He pictured his father's stern, proud face in his mind, and tried for a moment to imagine his father being proud of him. He could do it so easily when he was a boy, but now, it was easy to hear the words, but they did not fit the scenario. He knew his father would not be proud of him if he killed Itachi. He would not even be proud of the ability to be able to accomplish the task.

But could he even accomplish it, if he tried? Could he raise his hand to kill the brother he so much hated? It was sitting there, in front of his parents' graves that he remembered. He remembered his childhood, he remembered the days spent in the shadow of his brother, he remembered the happiness. That night, kneeling on the grass, he remembered the days when his parents were alive. But he did not remember them nostalgically; it was like he was only remembering yesterday. There was no bitterness in his memories. He remembered Itachi the clearest. He remembered being cared for by his older brother, a brother who truly loved him. He remembered watching with awe as his brother practiced his ninjutsu, he

remembered his brother flicking his forehead and apologizing he was too busy, he remembered his brother carrying him home on his back. He remembered the careworn expression on his brother's face, the sadness in his eyes that had started to grow. He remembered...

The grass in front of his parents' graves grew blurry and he hurriedly wiped his eyes before the moisture became tears. What had happened? He wondered for the millionth time since his parents were killed. When had it become possible? When had Itachi changed? What he had done was unforgivable, yet he didn't understand. Why? He closed his eyes. It was impossible to deny that his brother had carried out the task of killing the clan, but somewhere in the depths of his hatred, he knew there was something he couldn't let go of, no matter how badly he wanted to.

In the same way a mother could not truly hate her child, Sasuke knew that a part of him, no matter how tiny or small it was, could not, would not, be able to hate Itachi. There was still a grain of that unconditional love.

But to forsake his revenge... His reason for living was revenge. Whatever had changed Itachi caused him to be a threat. He knew the risks of leaving Itachi alive; he remembered the vivid nightmare of finding Sakura dead—dead by his brother's hands. But when the vengeance was taken, what would he do with his life? What would be his purpose for living then?

He closed his eyes, meditating deeply on everything. He had friends now, friends who cared about him so much. He had someone who loved him heart and soul, someone who loved him so much that she was willing to go against her parents to stay by his side. His reason for living would be continuing to protect those who cared about him. He had to protect them; losing everything once had destroyed him.

He knew he would not be able to survive a second time.

How long he spent kneeling there, he didn't know. But he sat there until the sun had fully set, and the stars were all out and twinkling.

And it was when the moonlight was the clearest that he finally opened his eyes. He finally knew what he had to do.

A/N: Well, I think that's the first time in a while that I've actually felt my very soul integrated with Sasuke's character. Angsty, angsty.

Thanks to everyone who told me that I wrote fight scenes very well. I've decided to stop complaining about them, seeing as I seem to be doing a well enough job, despite not liking them. :P

GOOD NEWS EVERYONE! : (And bad news at the same time.) I'm finished Blind! I've written the epilogue, and everything's finished (that's the bad news). The *good* news is that I will go back to updating weekly! So it's not just every other Wednesday now, it's every Wednesday, I'll be updating! I even updated really early today! As in 1:30 am Wednesday morning. :p (Which still feels like Tuesday night for me. x.x) Yay!

Chapter 61

A/N: Thanks for the support you guys. Yes, the story is almost over. I wasn't going to tell you guys how long it's going to be, but I decided I might as well. The whole story is seventy-two chapters long—so only ten left. There will also be a bonus chapter of extras. Extras include the explanation of symbolism, some bloopers that my sister, my editor, and I all came up with, and some deleted scenes. Stuff like that.

As for those of you who are thinking of leaving this story, don't bother telling me. I don't know what you hope to accomplish by telling me you're fed up with the length, or the plot, or whatever. I'm done now, I'm not going to stop posting because of you, and I'm not going to stop writing because of you. Please don't bother telling me, because I really don't care.

For those who are not affected by the above message, please refrain from commenting. I know: I love you guys too. :)

And as for SasuSaku development. Yeah I know: it's kinda flatlining. But happens in real life, doesn't it? You think you're just friends, you try and convince yourself you're just friends; so you act like friends, but more than friends. Things stay like that for a while, hanging in the balance...and then BOOM, you're like: wait a minute, I'm in love with this person. Think of a graph: gradual incline, then it flattens out for a bit, and then a sharp incline—so sharp it practically is going vertical. Gods, graphs for relationships? I think my comp sci class is getting to my head. O.o

Chapter Sixty-One: Misunderstanding

Sakura lay awake in bed, the blankets pulled tightly around her. She was staring at the wall, unable to sleep. The reason she couldn't

sleep was because of one thing, or, rather specifically, one person. She was lying in bed alone. She wasn't just simply concerned; no, she had been concerned at eleven o'clock at night, but it was one o'clock now. They had a clock now in their room, and she wasn't sure if it had been a good thing to get, because now she was beyond the point of concern. She was worried to the point where she was terrified.

Sasuke was not home. He had been gone for several hours. And she could not explain it.

When he told her he was going out, she had not asked where he was going. He often did that, and he was usually home within a reasonable amount of time. But tonight he had not returned, but still she waited up for him. This was the first time she had ever had to wait for him, and the last time she had waited for his return, he had never come back. Perhaps that was why she was finding it impossible to sleep, perhaps that was why she was so worried, so worried that he wouldn't come back.

She didn't know when she had first started contemplating the possibility, but somehow in the space of two hours she was beginning to wonder if Sasuke had run away again. She had been so distracted that afternoon with the idea that her family was going to come to dinner the next night that she hadn't been watching Sasuke all that closely. He had been so driven with the exam, and then after the Forest of Death there were times that he seemed to be brooding over something, and there was a conflicted expression on his face, no matter how subtle it was.

There was something she had been trying to deny and avoid since her father had been found, and that something was the fact that Sasuke was still bent on revenge. Maybe it was because she was so upset over her father's disappearance that she was afraid to even consider the day that Sasuke might do the same. Yet she hoped that he wouldn't; she wanted to believe that these past months had taught him something, had helped him change his mind.

But the more she thought about it, the more worried she became, and as one thirty ticked on the clock, she felt her worry grow to the point where she couldn't bear to wait any longer. If he were coming back, he would have been back by then, wouldn't he?

She threw back the covers, and with a hurried speed she got dressed again. He couldn't have left, she told herself, he wouldn't do that to them. He wouldn't disappear on her again, he wouldn't, would he?

She could tell herself that, but if she truly believed it, she knew she wouldn't be getting up. She wouldn't have to look.

With solemnity, Sasuke left the graveyard, his hands in the pockets. His mind was weighed heavily, but having taken the time to think things over had made it a bit better. He was content now, and as he strode out of the graveyard, his chuunin vest on his back, and his Konoha headband worn proudly on his forehead, he felt a sense of purpose return to him, stronger than it had been in years.

But he could not dwell on it long. Because just then he felt the chakra signature of a very panicked Sakura come in and out on the edge of his awareness.

With labored breath, Sakura ran out through the streets, her green eyes darting every which way, looking for anything, anything at all that would show he was still here in Konoha. Every single place she could remember being with Sasuke, she visited, in hopes that maybe he would be there. She visited the park, the training grounds, the Stone Faces where they used to practice ninjutsu, Ichiraku's Ramen stand, the Hokage Tower, anywhere she could think of. She never even considered looking in the Konoha graveyard.

It was finally two in the morning when she finally stood still. She was in the street of the Yamanaka Flower Shop when she finally gave up. She was bent over her hands on her knees, breathing heavily, her

throat dry. She started to shake all over. She couldn't find him, he wasn't anywhere, he had really left, and there could be no other explanation.

She started to cry.

Her thoughts were all awhirl and she couldn't make sense of anything that flitted through her head. She only understood one thing: she could not find Sasuke. Her crying had heightened from silent tears to quiet shaking sobs. She could not find him, he was gone, he had left her alone, and it was too late to get him back.

Sasuke found Sakura's chakra signature easily. Its panicked state stood out against the dormant signatures of slumbering villagers. He felt her overall worry and fear, and when it came to a halt, there was a flair of despair. He hurried as quickly as he could, worried himself. He hadn't seen such a drastic change in her mood since her father had disappeared, and this was just as bad, if not a little worse.

He swore he would find out who did this to her.

Sakura heard her name only once, but once was enough for her. It was the right voice; she snapped her head up the moment she heard the first syllable—it was Sasuke's voice. She looked over her shoulder, towards the source of his voice. And there he was standing at the street corner, his headband still on his forehead, and still wearing his chuunin vest, standing out in the moonlight. One glimpse and she was gone, running towards him faster than she had run earlier that evening. She only caught a glance at his face before she threw her arms around him, not registering the look of concern and surprise on his face before she embraced him.

"Thank God!" she cried softly into the folds of his shirt, tears of relief replacing those of anguish.

"What's wrong?" he asked her, his voice full of urgent concern.

She pulled away enough to look up at him, now that she had found him, she couldn't *not* be angry with him. She wasn't really all that angry with him, just irritated; she was more relieved than anything else.

"Don't you dare ever scare me like that again!" she blurted out, and the exclamation took Sasuke by surprise, "What is wrong with you?! Do you realize what time it is?!"

When he didn't answer, she continued.

"It's two in the morning!" she shouted in answered, "Do you have any idea how worried I was? Do you know how long I stayed up waiting for you? Can you even guess what I was *thinking* ?!"

She didn't wait for an answer. She buried her face back in his shirt, so relieved that he was still there. She was so happy that her assumptions had been wrong, that he hadn't left her. There weren't words enough to describe how she felt at that moment. She just abandoned thought entirely, just holding onto the notion that Sasuke was safe and sound in her arms. After a long pause, she felt Sasuke slowly put his arms around her to hold her close in return. He didn't say anything, but silently rested his hand on her lower back, lacing the fingers of his other hand through her hair to cradle her head against his shoulder.

"Don't ever disappear on me Sasuke," she whispered, "Don't ever leave me alone to wonder why you left."

Silence. There were no more words, only thoughts, thoughts on Sasuke's part. He hadn't realized the time, he didn't think much about how long he'd been gone. After all, he hadn't gone far, but he didn't really think about the affect it would have on Sakura. Even though he and Sakura had been living together for months, he had always been used to taking care of himself only. He hadn't thought about how his long absence would affect Sakura, and how her selfless nature would cause her to worry. He was too selfish and she

was too selfless. An odd pair, yet it wasn't balanced. He needed to be more selfless, and she could use a little more selfishness.

Closing his eyes he thought again. They weren't together, they were friends, yet why did he feel this overwhelming need to make himself balanced with Sakura? Why didn't he feel this way towards his other friends? And why was it that only around Sakura did he feel that strange unidentifiable emotion? He didn't understand, but he couldn't help but bend to the will of those feelings; fighting it felt like he was fighting gravity, it simply pulled him back in.

And it was because of that, that he knew that he would never be able to leave and leave her wondering why he was gone. He knew that he would have to leave at some point to take revenge against Itachi, but he would come back. If this was how she reacted when she only thought he had left, he knew it would almost kill her if he actually did. An icy sensation came over him as he remembered the dream he had back in October, the one in which Sakura had died...because of him.

A wandering Sakura, desperately searching for him.

"Help me find him, please. He's missing—I'm so scared. Please."

A resentful Naruto, blaming him for her death.

"She died because of you! Because you left her behind a second time," Naruto shouted at him, "And after this, you come back? Even when she's dead, you can't stop trying to hurt her!"

A tall white tombstone, bearing her name.

, - Haruno Sakura, was carved onto the stone before him.

The voice of a demon, his own hatred, whispering in his ear.

'You haven't let go of me yet...' came his own voice from around him, as he realized the world possessed no shadows.

He opened his eyes again and looked at the cherry-blossom-coloured haired girl that he was holding tightly. He found his heart twisting in directions it shouldn't, and he was worried. Was he really making the right choice? But in the dream, he had left without telling her, assuring her, that he would come back to her, to Konoha to start his future after being rid of the past. And maybe if he told her, he would be able to prevent his nightmare from becoming a reality, maybe if she knew, he could save her.

"Don't be annoying," he said finally, quietly, "No matter where I go, I'll always come back."

He only hoped that his words would be enough to keep her going while he was gone.

Yamanaka Ino was always a light sleeper, perhaps it came from the fact that she had sharp ears because of her consistent habit of eavesdropping, or perhaps it was because she was a medic and had to be awake in an instant if called for an emergency. Either way, it was easy to wake her, and even the slightest ruckus could rouse her. So when she heard the voice of someone down in the street below making a fuss over who-knew-what, she was instantly awake.

She lay in bed for a while, hoping that whoever it was, some squabbling couple or another, would leave soon and allow her to fall back asleep. It only took her a couple more minutes to realize that the person who was in the streets was Sakura. Ino rolled over and looked at her alarm clock and saw that it was indeed in keeping with Sakura's loud account: it was two-eleven in the morning. Lying in bed a bit longer she listened to the banter down in the street.

"Do you have any idea how worried I was? Do you know how long I stayed up waiting for you? Can you even guess what I was *thinking* ?!"

Ino frowned and slowly rolled over towards her window. What was going on? Why was Sakura down in the street anyways? This should

have occurred to her earlier. Ino sat up slightly, and pushed the edge of her curtains aside, peering down below to the street. What she saw was not exactly what she expected; she was expecting to see an upset Sakura standing in front of an obviously late Sasuke, her hands on her hips. But what she saw instead was Sakura, being held by the last person on earth who she would expect to hold anyone. Sasuke had his arms wrapped around Sakura in a protective embrace, holding her head close against his shoulder.

Ino let the curtain fall back as she lay back down in her bed. Perhaps Sakura didn't need as much help as she and the girls (meaning predominantly her and Ten Ten) thought she did. She seemed to be doing very well on her own, even if neither Sasuke nor Sakura realized it.

"Well, I just hope this evening won't turn out like last time," Sakura said, peering over Sasuke's shoulder and at the frying pan he was working over at the oven.

Her parents and Kanaye were due in an hour, and Sakura was getting nervous again. Things were better now between her parents and Sasuke than they were before, back in late July. But still, the fact that it had been Kanaye who had brought this up concerned Sakura; she wasn't sure what this meant. She and Kanaye were close, and she thought she could trust him a little while longer to be on her side. Now she wasn't sure.

"Things will be fine," Sasuke answered stirring in some chopped onions, "Everything is in place, your things moved to the study, all evidence of you recently being in my room is gone... We will have nothing to worry about."

"I just don't understand," she answered, sitting down on the edge of the counter, "I don't know why Kanaye came to you all of a sudden like that."

Sasuke shrugged, "Maybe it'd been bothering him for some time."

Sakura sighed, and decided to dismiss the notion. Sasuke was convinced that everything would go fine and dandy, and she knew she probably shouldn't be making a big deal out of it. Her parents would be in and out, and she knew for a fact that she wouldn't have to worry about how her mother would behave. Kanaye was generally respectable, and according to Sasuke, he was willing to back down if her father was convinced. So again, it was just to please her father; it wasn't so different from last time.

"Are you sure you don't want any help with anything for dinner?" she asked, watching Sasuke with mild interest as he stared hard at a cookbook propped up in front of him.

"No," he said flatly, "I already told you, I don't want your parents to think I only want to keep you here because I can't cook for myself."

She rolled her eyes, "Well then, can I get you anything? Like, pass you carrots or something?"

"If you want, you can set the table," Sasuke answered, "since you seem so bent on helping me."

Sakura hopped down from the counter and moved to grab some plates from the first kitchen cupboard, "Well, it's just that I feel completely useless just sitting here watch you. I want to *do* something."

Sasuke turned and looked at her, his face serious, "You're not useless."

She was taken aback for a moment, just by the seriousness in his voice. Sure, she'd thought herself useless in the past, and it didn't help when her father had criticized her the last time he was over visiting, but she could truthfully say that she felt comfortably useful. She turned the seriousness around and smiled teasingly at Sasuke.

"But I'm annoying, right?" she laughed, walking towards the table, setting them out.

She turned around again just in time to see Sasuke smirk and turn back to his cooking.

"Right," he said, in confirmation.

She laughed and scanned the contents of the kitchen cupboards for anything else they would need. "And are you going to learn to smile properly too tonight, Sasuke?" she was saying now, eyeing some bowls, "Are we going to be having soup?"

"No, but put some bowls out for rice," Sasuke answered, "And why does it matter if I learn how to smile 'properly' tonight?"

Sakura straightened up, clutching a stack of bowls close to her, "Well, my dad might change his mind about you if you haven't learned how to smile since the last time we had dinner together."

Sasuke chuckled slightly, "If your father has picked up some of Kanaye's humor it might be a little easier."

Sakura started to laugh at this, almost dropping one of the bowls as she put it out, "That's a scary mental image—my dad acting like Kanaye? Pssh."

"Exactly," Sasuke answered, resetting the heat on the stovetop and then moving to chop some carrots on the cutting board.

Sakura moved close to where Sasuke was to grab the tea mugs from the upper shelf in one of the cupboards. It was a higher shelf and she had to stand on tiptoes to reach them. The set of mugs she was reaching for was the set she had accidentally broken one—that was when Sasuke had asked her what Kakashi had talked to her about on the day that she found out her father was missing. There were five mugs left, and she thought it would be a perfect number. It was a nice set, very traditional, her father liked traditional.

She had put three out of the five mugs on the counter and was struggling to reach the one that had been nudged the farthest back.

She stood on tiptoes on one foot and tried to reach it. Just then her hips bumped against Sasuke's causing her to lose her balance a little. She wasn't going to fall over, but her wrist knocked the closer of the two mugs off the shelf.

"Watch out!" she shouted, afraid the mug would hit Sasuke, but it didn't—it didn't even hit the ground.

The instant she had shouted, Sasuke snapped his head up, and spotted the mug. It happened so quickly that Sakura almost didn't see it, but Sasuke hand snapped out and grabbed the mug from the air, neatly preventing it from shattering. There was a pause, Sakura and Sasuke both stared at the undamaged mug in his hands, and then they looked at each other. Sakura gasped. Instead of the obsidian hue that she was used to, there was a dull shade of red instead—it was not the crimson of the Sharingan, but instead, a wine-coloured red.

"Sasuke...your..." she started, but then was lost for a moment in awe, "...eyes..."

Sasuke blinked, and then his eyes widened. The mug was hastily placed on the counter before Sasuke tore out of the kitchen. Sakura blinked once and then turned and followed him. It was in the bathroom that Sakura found Sasuke, staring at the mirror, his nose an inch away from the glass. His eyes flickered towards her once before resting on himself in the mirror again.

"Your Sharingan...it's..." she whispered, coming over and standing beside him. She put her head on his shoulder so that the both of them were looking in the smallish bathroom mirror.

"It's not manifested yet, not fully," he murmured, seeming awed by the colour of his own eyes, "but... I was beginning to think that it might never come back."

"I promised, remember?" she said; Sasuke's eyes flicked to her eyes in the mirror and held them, "And I'll help it in any way I can."

They stared at each other in the mirror for a while longer, and Sakura watched as the damask red hue faded away from his eyes. She was smiling softly, like she had just witnessed something beautiful and miraculous—in a way, she had. And she stood there, cherishing the moment, standing close to Sasuke, feeling content...until the smell of burnt food slowly began to waft into the bathroom.

Sasuke jolted before Sakura noticed the smell right away.

"Damn!" Sasuke swore and rushed back towards the kitchen.

Sakura could only laugh.

Sakura seated herself at the table a half an hour later, sitting across from her father at the small kitchen table. The food was crammed onto the table in between the plates, and it was amazing that all of it had managed to fit. Sasuke had made a lot, and Sakura was impressed by how much he had learned from her—of course he had used a cook book, but he had learned things that the cookbook hadn't mentioned, like how long to cook the rice, how to test if certain food items were cooked fully through, etc. The burnt dish hadn't burned all that much, just a few vegetables had been scorched and stuck to bottom of the frying pan; the rest of the vegetables were salvageable, and a few spices managed to hide the slightly burnt flavour entirely.

Of course, when Sakura's family arrived, her mother had insisted on bringing a dessert; she brought a beautiful looking cake that was topped with beautifully arranged sliced fruits. Sakura almost accused her mother of buying it at the cake shop, but she decided against it—knowing her mother, she had spent the whole afternoon baking it.

All of them had trooped into the kitchen, and Sasuke directed them to where they should sit in the most polite manner Sakura had ever seen from him. Sasuke did not use the honorific suffixes when talking to people—if he was going to be polite to someone, he would use their first name, and only if he knew them. If it were a stranger

that he was forced to be nice to, he would simply not address them at all, and assume they would know that they were the ones being talked to. But tonight, though Sakura wasn't really paying attention, she could have sworn she heard Sasuke call her mother 'Haruno-san' as he sat her next to her father.

Sasuke had wanted the order at the table specific, though he wouldn't explain why. He was seated at the head of the table, because it was his home, after all. He wanted Sakura at his right hand and her father at his left—Sakura guessed it was to show that he held respect for both of them. Sakura's mother was seated next to her husband and Kanaye next to Sakura.

"The food looks really good," Kanaye said, eyeing the plate closest to him, "How long did it take you to make all of this?"

"Sasuke was cooking most of the afternoon," Sakura answered, smiling; Sasuke was right in expecting that her parents would think that she had done the cooking.

"The Emo Prince can *cook* ?" Kanaye said, sounding astounded; he meant it in good humor—Sakura knew even though Kanaye was the one who had caused this event to arise, he still liked Sasuke well enough and bore him no grudge.

"Of course I can cook," Sasuke replied indignantly, "Sakura isn't staying here to be my housekeeper."

Sakura refrained from rolling her eyes—it was a bit of a blatant hint, but then again, that could be what Sasuke wanted it to come across as. Instead, she just picked up the plate of food nearest to her, and offered it to her father. At her home, she noticed that Sasuke had taken a bit of everything that her mother had cooked, and this time, it was her turn to try a bit of everything. It seemed that she wasn't the only one dying to find out what sort of cook Sasuke was, as everyone helped themselves to everything. It was beginning to feel like an inspection again, Sakura thought sardonically.

"My goodness, Sasuke," Sakura's mother exclaimed after taking a few bites, "This food is excellent. I never would have imagined you one with culinary expertise."

Out of the corner of her eye, Sakura saw a proud smirk tug at the corner of Sasuke's mouth, "I've had to live by myself for many years—I wasn't going to let myself eat garbage. But Sakura also taught me some things about cooking as well, which would have helped me when I didn't have my sight."

"Did you cook blindfolded?" Kanaye joked.

"He could've if he wanted to," Sakura answered, smiling.

"I heard that you fought with a blindfold during the Finals," Sakura's father spoke up for the first time; Sakura personally felt relief that he spoke, she was afraid he would be rude and silent throughout the evening, "Did you? How did the Chuunin Exam find you?"

Sasuke gave a brief account of his perspective of the Chuunin Exam. It was brief and to the point; it wasn't a very descriptive or opinionated account, more like a factual narrative. Sakura smiled to herself, this was probably the most that her family would ever hear Sasuke speak. Sasuke in a few words outlined the process used to weed out the victims in the written exam, stating that that, and a high score on the written test, was crucial to pass. Sakura knew that Sasuke had gotten a hundred on the written portion, though he didn't say it; Sasuke didn't boast. Next he briefly went over the Forest of Death, recounting that because Yugito had fallen ill briefly during the first evening that they were slightly delayed but managed to make it to the tower early. He finished by giving a short account of the tournament, confirming that yes he had worn a blindfold. And enjoyed his fight with Yugito the most—hers having proved the biggest challenge.

"Technically, I was too advanced for the exam, but protocol dictated that I actually had to be tested in the exam before I could be given a

Chuunin class," he finished, folding his hands; he turned to Sakura's father, "I want to ask you something."

Her father looked a little surprised at being directly addressed, "What is it?"

"In ANBU, do you know of a young man, about my age, who goes by the name of Sai?" Sasuke asked, "I doubt it is his real name, but he uses ink painting to fight."

Sakura was a little surprised. Sai had been Sasuke's teammate, she knew, but she couldn't understand why she thought to ask for him in ANBU. She looked at her father who was wiping his mouth with a napkin, studying Sasuke carefully.

"Yes, I know the man you speak of—I know him as Genji, some know him as Kane, and others as Shin," her father replied, "Why do you ask?"

Sakura was surprised; this could only mean that Sai was in ANBU, but that meant that someone in ANBU had participated in the exam... She looked at Sasuke again, surprise on her face. Sasuke shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"I only asked because I wanted to be sure in knowing that the Konoha's Councilors still do not trust me," Sasuke said in reply, "I had the pleasure of being teamed up with Sai for the Forest of Death. I believe he was sent to keep an eye on me."

Sakura glanced at her father—had he known about this? It didn't seem like it, as he looked as equally surprised as she did about hearing the news. She was a bit relieved, because that meant that her father hadn't had a hand in sending someone to watch Sasuke during the exam.

"Wouldn't that be unfair to the other participants?" Sakura's mother asked then, frowning slightly.

"Sai only did what was asked of him," Sasuke answered, "I believe he was ordered to refrain from interfering to the best of his ability."

"That's bizarre," Kanaye commented, "I'm sure if the other Kage's of the Five Great Shinobi nations found out, they wouldn't be too pleased."

"Well, the turn out was pretty good—three people passed," Sakura answered, "And they were each from different villages."

"But it doesn't look good that this Sai-Kane-Shin-whatever was on the same team as Sasuke when he passed," Kanaye countered.

"Well, what's done is done, and this Sai did not participate in the tournament, which is the part that matters the most," Sakura's mother said rationally, "And I am glad that Sasuke managed to pass the exam. Though I think a lot of people were expecting it. Congratulations."

"Thank you," Sasuke said and Sakura saw the hint of a smile on his face.

The evening passed rather quickly, and Sakura was surprised that her father was being so pleasant. She couldn't understand why he was leaving them alone, and since her father was silent, so was Kanaye. The food was good, the conversation was friendly, and the overall mood was cheerful. And when it was time for her family to go, the only bit of tension was when Sasuke and her father were exchanging farewell words. Her father held Sasuke's gaze for a moment, and there was a short stare-off; her father looked like he wanted to say something, and Sasuke looked like he was daring him to say it. Sakura held her breath for a moment—he was going to say something about her living there, wasn't he? But no words were said, instead, her father gave a slight bow, which Sasuke returned; Sakura breathed a sigh of relief.

"It was a pleasant evening, thank you for your hospitality," her father said gruffly.

"Yes, thank you," her mother agreed.

"Damn, you can cook," Kanaye sounded impressed.

"Well, thank you for coming," Sakura said, subconsciously linking her arm with Sasuke's, "I'm glad you could make it on such short notice."

"Well, Kisho is going on a mission tomorrow, so it was a good thing Sasuke was kind enough to invite us yesterday instead of next week," Sakura's mother smiled.

"Yes, well, we had better be going," her father said crustily, "I will see you when I return."

"Take care!" Sakura said cheerfully.

She didn't want to say 'be careful', because she didn't want her father to worry, but she still thought it silently to herself. She smiled at their retreating backs as they left, but then turned to Kanaye who was lingering for a moment. She raised her eyebrow quizzically at him. He glanced over at their parents and then turned to Sakura.

"Hey, Sakura, can I talk to you for a sec?" he asked, glancing at Sasuke pointedly.

Sasuke paused for a moment but then turned and left them, muttering something about cleaning up the dishes. Sakura stood on the veranda with her brother, looking confused; neither of them moved until Sasuke's footsteps were gone and a loud clattering of dishes could be heard from the kitchen, carried down the hall.

"Hey," Kanaye said, trying to smile. He always got that strained sort of smile on his face when he was going to bring up some sort of sensitive or serious topic. Sakura didn't like the sign of that.

"Hey," Sakura answered, "What's up?"

"Nothing much," Kanaye said sheepishly, "It's just...well, I'm sure his Highness has told you about giving him an asshole-ish talking to?"

"Yeah he did," Sakura answered, smiling despite herself; she knew Kanaye felt bad about the way he had spoken to Sasuke, but felt too humiliated to say a straight-out apology to Sasuke's face, "Inuzuka Hana, huh?"

"He told you that part?" Kanaye said sheepishly, looking very embarrassed; she gave him a nod, "Well, you know, I've been crushing on her for years—never mind. By the way, do you have any idea how funny it sounds to hear Sasuke say 'impregnate'? Sorry, I had to say that. Um, yeah, anyways, none of that's important right now. I didn't want to talk to you about the argument."

"What'd you want to talk to me about?" Sakura asked, smiling a little at her brother's nervous ramblings.

"I wanted to tell you why I even brought it up with him to begin with," Kanaye said, shuffling his feet a bit, "Or rather, I want to ask you a question which is related to why I brought up the argument."

Sakura nodded slowly, "Okay, shoot."

"How much pain are you in?" Kanaye asked, his tone suddenly turning somber.

Sakura found herself stumble in her mind, completely caught by surprise. She couldn't think of how to answer that, she couldn't even think of what he could mean by that.

"W-what?" she spluttered eventually, finding something to answer.

"How much pain are you in?" Kanaye repeated, and then when she still remained confused he closed his eyes and sighed: "It's like this, Sakura: I see you here, with me, happier than ever. Your eyes are bright and your smile comes easily. But I see the light in your eyes come faster, brighter when you see Uchiha Sasuke. And every word that comes from him makes you smile, more so than when the words come from others. And don't think that I haven't noticed that every

time he touches you, your face mellows out. But for all that, he has never reciprocated your feelings has he?"

Sakura was still too surprised to formulate an answer—she didn't say anything.

"I thought so," Kanaye closed his eyes, "I know you are happy now, but I refuse to believe you are completely happy, Sakura. You love being with Sasuke, but to love him and not have him love you back, I know is hurting you. I just don't understand how you tolerate that amount of pain."

Sakura was silent for a moment. So that's what this was about. She firmed her mouth into a hard line. Yes it hurt, and sometimes she was painfully aware of it. But then she'd remember the look on Sasuke's face when he had called her beautiful, or the peace on his face when she'd sing for him, or the way he held her tight every night as they fell asleep.

"Because," she said finally, "The love I do receive is enough to keep me going."

Kanaye was silent for a moment; and then he pulled his sister into a bear hug, "Okay...I believe you. Look, I know it's strange to ask for you to come home when I'm afraid he doesn't care about you enough...but I just don't want you to stay here if you're just getting hurt."

"I know," Sakura answered, a small smile coming to her face, "Dad was the same way. He thought the same thing."

"Seriously?" Kanaye asked, letting her go and looking at her; she nodded, "No way."

"Yes way," Sakura retorted, "He was afraid I was being under appreciated. But it's good, you guys just don't understand how things are between us."

The last sentence she uttered caused her to stop and think, and even after she had said goodbye to Kanaye and waved, it still hung around her head. She took her place next to Sasuke at the kitchen sink and began drying dishes automatically. Could she rightly say that her father and brother didn't understand what it was like between her and Sasuke when she herself didn't even know what was between them anymore?

The next day, when Naruto, Sakura, and Sasuke were summoned to the Hokage Tower, Sakura couldn't say that she had no idea what it was about. Since the exam had been finished, Sakura had been waiting for Tsunade to call them—depended on it really. Sasuke was now equal rank with her and Naruto, and that meant that instead of having exceptions made for their team, Sasuke could now be offered C and B ranked missions regularly. Sakura knew it was only a matter of time before they too were summoned for some new missions.

Sasuke seemed to have sensed this too, and quickly called Sakura after receiving word. The two of them rushed towards the Hokage Tower, and ran into Naruto on the way there. The three of them now stood before Tsunade, waiting patiently to be told why they had been summoned, though all of them already knew why.

"Good afternoon Team Seven," Tsunade said, looking up from some of her paperwork, "It's been some time since I've seen the three of you all in front of me. I'm sure you're wondering why you've been call —"

"Are you going to send us on a mission, Tsunade-obaachan?!"
Naruto burst out—looking more excited than a kid on his birthday.

Tsunade paused, looking vaguely annoyed—Naruto didn't know what he was risking every time he said that. Sakura knew the more demonic side of Tsunade, and she was quite aware of what could happen to Naruto. In fact, she was very surprised at how patient Tsunade was with Naruto, it was scary to watch some times. It was

like waiting for a volcano to erupt—you knew it was going to happen, and you were scared when it would, but you didn't know when.

"Yes, Naruto," Tsunade said with patience, "I'm going to be sending you on a mission. I'm sure Sasuke would like to work some more hours off of his sentence—he hasn't been able to while preparing and taking the Chuunin Exam. But now that he's passed, I can put you to work, isn't that right, Sasuke?"

"Hn."

Tsunade began flipping through her paperwork looking through the various requests that had been sent to Konoha, requesting the aid of their talented shinobi, "Actually, a lot of missions have been coming in specifically requesting Team Seven for hire since they saw Sasuke's performance in the tournament. A lot of high ranking people were impressed that he could fight blindfolded."

"Hmph," Naruto sulked, "If I had learned my Fuuton Rasengan by the time I took the Exam, our number of missions would have increased, too."

"Yes, but then also a lot of the other contestants would have been dead, as well, which is a drawback," Tsunade commented off-handedly, "You'll be permitted to use it in the Jounin Exam Naruto, rest assured. –Aha! How about this mission?"

Tsunade read off to them a description of a mission, which entailed them delivering a expensive birthday gift from the Feudal Lord to his daughter. The mission would only take a week, and was ranked C, but the pay for it was handsome. Team Seven talked amongst themselves for a bit, discussing it.

"That's too easy though!" Naruto complained, putting on a grumpy face, "Tsunade-obaachan, don't you have an A-Ranked mission?"

"If I was going to send you on an A-Ranked mission, I would send Kakashi with you," Tsunade replied tartly, "The answer is no. There

are many A-Ranked requests for Team Seven, but I will not be sending you three on one any time soon."

Sasuke looked like he wouldn't mind a C-Ranked mission, though. He told Naruto as much, except, as per usual, with few words. Naruto answered this statement by asking Sasuke if he had recently received a blow to the head.

"No, dobe," Sasuke said irritably, "But the sooner we get one mission done, we can do another one. By doing many C and B-Ranked missions, we will get the experience to go on an A-Ranked mission."

When asked, Sakura said she had no opinion. She did not mind doing the C-Ranked mission, though she was surprised that Sasuke was okay with it as well. Though she suspected just by his explanation to Naruto that it had something to do with his Sharingan. He trusted his senses well enough, she knew, because he used them a lot, even though he had his sight, but she knew that he really desired the Sharingan to return. The revelation yesterday showed signs that it was coming back of its own accord—she suspected that he was hoping if they held out long enough, it would be fully re-manifested before they went on an A-Ranked mission.

In the end, they did decide on going on the C-Ranked mission, but Sakura wasn't really paying attention to what was being said around her. She was busy thinking to herself—she didn't know if medical ninjutsu was the correct type of chakra needed to reactivate Sasuke's genetic switch on the Sharingan, but maybe there were other ways she could help prompt it into returning.

Maybe, with her help, Uchiha Sasuke could return to his former glory, or even more powerful than before.

A/N: Best adverb ever: crustily. And Sasuke's Sharingan is returning! Yays! Oh, and f.y.i., this mission will not be described—'tis implied.

Chapter 62

A/N: Ahahahaha! April Fools! I bet a lot of you were looking at your inboxes all Wednesday and were like: wtf? Where's the chapter? Okay, not as funny, but I didn't have time to pull off the other prank I was going to do instead. Which involved posting my Japanese Essay—entirely in Japanese—instead, while leaving a message saying that it was the final chapter. Sadly I was too busy doing homework to do that. So I was like: I'll just not post and give them a scare! Okay, enough talking from me. Here's your chapter!

Note: I know Madara is the Mizukage—but I like to think he's more of a figurehead and doesn't actually do anything. Which is why Kirigakure would not be siding with Akatsuki. And also why Kisame is an ex-mist ninja instead of being allowed to walk around freely in his hometown.

Chapter Sixty-Two: Stepping Forward and Falling Back

Itachi stood stoically next to Kisame in the flickering lamplight, the two of them standing in an office-like room. Pain sat in the shadier part of the room like a clichéd villain, eying them with his Rinnegan eyes. The lights overhead flickered again, and went out for a split second before spluttering back to life. Ever since Pain had caused havoc and mayhem in Amegakure, the village was still struggling to recover. Even here, in the Akatsuki Headquarters, they suffered continuous problems with electricity and sometimes plumbing too. Many of their other bases were better than this one.

Pain's Rinnegan eyes flicked briefly to the light in irritation before resting on Itachi and Kisame again—a movement so quick that only Itachi could have caught it with his Sharingan. He did not know why they had been summoned, and neither did Kisame. Itachi had a vague anxiety-like feeling in the back of his mind when pondering the

idea that maybe he had been called to discuss the recent activities of Nariko. But then why call Kisame as well? Furthermore, he should not care either way.

Pain cleared his throat. "You have both come—good," Pain observed, "The reason I have called you both before me today is that I have recently received some reports that the Sanbi demon has moved from its last known location."

Itachi and Kisame said nothing; Itachi made a slight incline with his chin to acknowledge the statement.

"I was originally going to send Tobi and Deidara to retrieve it, but due to certain circumstances, I will be sending you two instead," Pain continued, folding his hands, "Recent reports state that sightings of the Sanbi Bijuu have occurred by a number of the inhabitants of a small nation called the Land of Waves, or Wave Country. I wish for you two to travel to and confirm these reports."

He was to leave Amegakure on a mission to retrieve another Bijuu, the third one this year. But then there was the issue of Nariko—could she be trusted by herself for the duration of what could be a project of a couple months? He didn't think so. Konan was busy, too, now that they were once again in Amegakure. Whether or not she had the time to watch Nariko was a hard question to answer. What she oversaw now had been managed without her when they were in the Land of Earth; but when she was here, it seemed that everything that could be managed without her suddenly could *only* be handled by her.

"If the Bijuu is present, I want you to subdue it and we will perform the sealing," Pain instructed them, "Prepare yourselves for the journey and you will depart next week."

"Got it," Kisame nodded, looking pleased. He was the sort of person who never liked staying in one place for too long. He could live a few years in one place, but he could never settle down somewhere permanently. Kisame told him this many years ago, close to when

Itachi had first joined Akatsuki. Kisame was a likeable person, so Itachi wouldn't mind traveling with him again.

"Understood," Itachi answered, and the two of them turned to leave.

One week—that was the amount of time he would have in order to find someone to watch over Nariko while he was gone. If he were going to find someone, he would have to make good use of his time. He would start by asking Konan.

Before they left the room, Pain spoke an afterthought behind them: "Oh, and when your return, we will then finally seal away the Rokubi Jinchuuriki."

Echoing footsteps mingled with the sound of rain as Konan swept through the halls, a stack of paperwork under her arm. Not long ago, she had run into Hidan, which was always interesting—interesting in a negative sense. Of course when she had run into Hidan he was gushing blood from his chest and a number of other places, and he was looking as pleased as punch. Aside from being rude, a religious zealot, and a cross between a masochist and a sadist, she had nothing against him, not really. But even so, she couldn't ever talk to him without getting irritated with him. This time was no different; even though he had answered her question quite sufficiently, he had answered it in his own way: blah, cursing, blah, cursing, cursing, blah, Jashin this, blah, blah, cursing, Jashin that, blah, answer to question, blah, cursing, cursing, cursing.

It hadn't added to her mood, to say the least, she was already irritated with wasting valuable time looking for Kisame; thankfully, Hidan had managed to point her in the right direction. She had cast a final disgusted look at the hole in his chest before wandering off in the direction Hidan said he had last seen Kisame. She reflected on Hidan with a shake of her head; the only thing that had turned her off from him was his gruesome rituals. He didn't need her anyways—his rituals were like sex for him already.

From that point on, it didn't take long to find Kisame. He was tallest of Akatsuki, aside from Zetsu, whose plant extensions towered over everyone. Kisame himself was walking away from Konan when she spotted him at the end of the hall, looking over a scroll and scratching the back of his head idly.

"Oi, Sushi!" Konan called with much less grace than the Angel of God was supposed to have. She didn't care—she was irritated and stressed, and if the day continued on like it had already, she would throw a typewriter at someone.

Kisame turned at the sound of his given nickname. "Flower-chan," he sounded surprised.

"Don't call me that," she snapped automatically—she could say it all she wanted, she knew, but the nickname was going to stay. It was all Deidara's fault; well, no, mostly her own, for remaining secretive about herself for many years. And she'd never been able to get them to call her 'God's Messenger', or 'Angel of God'.

"I need to talk to you," she continued irritably before he could say anything; from her stack of papers she used her chakra to draw out a sheet from the middle of the stack—she brandished it in Kisame's face, "about this."

Kisame took half a step backwards so he could actually read what was on the paper. He took it from her, "What is this?"

"A report from Outpost Sangoshou in the Water Country," Konan replied factually, "Normally we're on good terms with the locals in that area—we haven't come across as being suspicious or untrustworthy. As you know, this is why your beloved ex-village, Kirigakure, hasn't found us yet. Apparently we ran into some trouble."

Kisame looked up from the sheet and at Konan, "What kind of trouble?"

"I don't know the specifics, but apparently, a few of our subordinates were asked to partake in some local festival—the fall out was when they were presented with some sort of tradition, they made a mistake and offended a great number of people. The town is apparently in an uproar, and the people are refusing service to any of our people. It's the closest town to the outpost and we need supplies from them; plus, this needs to be quieted down before someone commissions Kirigakure to deal with it in one way or another," Konan answered, wearied by the mere sound of the incident.

Pain only had to deal with information on the Jinchuuriki and Bijuu; *she* had to oversee the medical programs, the information the network, the trading contracts, and make decisions about each hideout's movement. This was just another thing that she had to deal with, and she wanted it dealt with quickly—nipped in the bud before it became a huge problem and she'd have to give orders on evacuations, redistribution of goods, reassignment of shinobi, etc.

"What do you want me to do about it?" Kisame asked, obviously unsure of what he was supposed to make of this information.

"Nobody can figure out what went wrong. The customs in the Land of Water are—to put it bluntly—weird," Konan answered, "I want you to go there, with your knowledge and expertise of the people, to find a way to fix things before they get out of hand."

Kisame looked a little offended, " *Weird* ?"

"Don't give me that, Sushi," she answered with a roll of her eyes, "Last time I checked, a requirement of graduation is to kill your classmates, there is no stable governmental power established, and every kid still has his or her teeth sharpened to a point by the time they turn fifteen, or whatever. I think it's pretty safe to say that the Land of Water's customs are weird. The offense that we're dealing with right now is probably because someone seasoned their shark fin soup with pepper instead of sea salt. Whatever it is, I want it out of my hair."

"I can't go," Kisame said a little stiffly—Konan didn't know how much pride he took in his shiny set of chompers, "Pain's ordered me and Itachi to go to that rinky-dink Land of Waves to check out and see if the rumors about Sanbi sightings are true or not. I leave in four days."

Konan closed her eyes and counted to ten. It was not a good day, no, not in the least. But what could she do? Next to Pain, she had absolute authority; she could technically order Kisame to do differently, even if she didn't have the authority to override Pain's orders. He would be angry with her if she reassigned Kisame—good she thought, it would be a nice change to be able to crush some of the eggshells she was walking delicately on. Of course Itachi couldn't go alone to the Land of Waves—if she was going to reassign Kisame and get away with it, she would have to assign someone else to go with Itachi.

Deidara simply would not do—he hated Itachi—besides, he and Tobi were on Pain's orders elsewhere at the moment. Hidan and Kakuzu were due to leave tomorrow to go gain some more funds for the organization; they needed the funds at that point in time, she couldn't take one away now. Not that either one would have trouble on their own, but Kakuzu was around to make sure that Hidan didn't shirk responsibility, and Hidan was around to make sure the Kakuzu didn't go overboard with his bounty hunting. It would be a bad idea to split them up. Sending someone else with either of them would end up killing said person. Itachi and Zetsu never got along either—simply because half of Zetsu disliked Itachi.

The only other option left was to go herself.

"I need you to do this, if I have to make it an order I will," Konan said patiently, and then she opened her eyes, "I'll take full responsibility for this by going with Itachi myself."

Kisame paused for a moment, and then an amused smirk played on his lips, "Alright, but be sure to actually get some work done while you're traveling."

A resounding smack echoed briefly in the hall. Konan's eyes were glaring up at Kisame, her hand still raised even after the slap had been delivered. Kisame looked stunned, a redness appearing on the side of his face where he had been struck, turning his blue-ish skin a blotchy purple. A number of small lacerations were on his face at the point of impact—little tiny paper cuts—and a number of them started to bleed. Konan lowered her hand; that had been the final straw.

"Let me remind you to mind your own damned business, Hoshigaki, or else next time I'll shove your Samehada so far up your ass that it'll start coming out of your mouth," she said threateningly. There was a deadly pause, and Kisame only grinned—he was a good-natured person and probably the idea of five foot seven woman trying to take down a six foot three man was hilarious. But she wasn't in the mood.

"Go and pack now," she told him coldly, "I want you to be on your way by six this evening at the latest. Feel free to leave earlier."

She turned and stormed off, trying to console herself that while she was traveling, at least someone else would have to do everything that she was currently responsible for.

Itachi moved almost silently through the halls as he moved throughout the complex, wondering in the corners of his mind why Konan was summoning him now, two days before he and Kisame were to leave for the Land of Waves. Not only had he not seen Kisame for two days, Itachi had, without any luck, tried to find a time in which he could approach her and discuss with her the matter of Nariko, but to no avail. Konan had simply been too busy to grant him audience. As it was, the last time he had seen her was in Nariko's room at the hospital, wearing a shocked expression on her face as she watched Nariko control her paper cranes with chakra. That had been almost two weeks ago. And now, after being unable to get a hold of her, she sends him a written request to meet her.

The closer Itachi got to the office space, where Konan worked, the busier the hallways became. There could be seen many people

going in different directions each carrying something, for the most part paperwork. Itachi entertained the notion of Konan being the real leader of Amegakure—she did most of the work anyways. He entered the office space, and there were a number of working desks and shinobi seated at them, working with whatever tasks they had been assigned. One woman close to him bowed respectfully, recognizing the red-clouded cloak he wore, identifying him as one of the top ten members in Akatsuki.

"Uchiha-sama, is there anything I can help you with?" the woman asked, straightening up from her bow.

"God's Messenger has summoned me," he answered, giving Konan's title, "I have come to see her."

The woman nodded, "Her personal office space can be found at the back of the room."

Itachi saw the door from where he stood—the door was open, and Itachi could just see someone in the room; it wasn't Konan, it was probably somebody discussing something with her. Itachi crossed the room, moving through the busy space, avoiding people as they walked hither and thither. When he arrived at the door, the shinobi inside nearly almost crashed into him on the way out, but he gracefully stepped out of the way as his Sharingan caught the movement before he was hit.

The shinobi looked shocked, "My deepest apologies, Uchiha-sama."

He gave a slight nod of a dismissive nature, and once the shinobi had left, Itachi turned and entered Konan's office space. She rose from her seat when she saw him, the stressful expression on her face melting away to an almost relieved look.

"Ah, Uchiha," she said in her formal tone, the one that she used in the presence of lower-ranking Akatsuki, "I am glad you responded to my summoning so quickly. The matter I wish to discuss with you is of utmost importance. Please shut the door."

Itachi did as she asked, and the door shut with a small thud. Konan immediately dropped the formal and holy look, her face relaxing considerably. Sitting down again she sighed heavily and then put her feet up on her desk, the cloak falling away to reveal her willowy legs. She put her head back and stared at the ceiling.

"Finally someone I can act relaxed around," she said, raising her hands and rubbing her eyes; she let her arms drop and then looked at him, "I'm glad you came. I was afraid you'd be too busy packing or something at the moment."

Itachi raised his eyebrows at her and then slowly crossed the room, sitting on the edge of her desk instead of the designated chair seated opposite her. He didn't know why he was surprised that she knew about his trip, after all, Pain was in control of all of them, and Konan was second-in-command. He looked at her feet perched on the desk next to him, and then, unavoidably, his eyes were drawn to her legs. One of her feet moved and nudged his hip with her toes.

"Tempted, are we?" she said flirtatiously, and then she gave a quiet laugh, so as not to be heard by the others in the room next door, "But we can't. Not now anyways."

He shifted his gaze so that he was looking at her face instead, "What did you want to see me about?"

"Some issues have come up at one of our outposts in Mizu, and I've sent Kisame to deal with it," she said, crossing her legs and folding her arms.

"Kisame and I were to leave in two days," he said, staring at her quizzically—he had wondered earlier if Kisame might be packing because Itachi hadn't seen him around, but now he had discovered that Konan had sent his traveling partner off somewhere else.

"I know," Konan said impassively, uncrossing her legs and putting her feet on the floor; she sat up, "All missions performed in search of

Bijuu must be done in twos, for safety reasons. So in Kisame's place...I'll be going with you."

Itachi gave a pause. He was mildly surprised—aside from the surprise of Kisame being reassigned and sent elsewhere without him knowing. He was more surprised by the fact that Konan was the one who would be traveling with him—he knew it probably wasn't Pain who decided to send her. It was probably a venture of her own design; he knew Pain and Madara did not approve of their interactions. He had never traveled with Konan before, but he knew that like him, there was a clear division between duty and pleasure. They were both loyal to Akatsuki first, before anything else, even each other.

However, traveling with Konan brought another issue to arise. It would pose much of a problem if he didn't come up with a solution.

"What of Nariko?" he asked her then, "It was my original intention to entrust her to your care again while Kisame and I were gone."

Konan looked ponderous for a moment, "Well, she'll have to be put in another's care then."

"Who?" he asked; this was his dilemma exactly.

Konan seemed to realize it too, "...Well, she'd have to be watched by someone of our rank...anyone lower would fail to know the significance. They could get clumsy."

"But who of our rank?" Itachi pressed, "The person whom she finds least frightening besides the two of us is Deidara."

"He's doing terrorist commissions for us at the moment," Konan said shaking her head, "Tobi is irresponsible, and Madara wouldn't have the patience."

"Zetsu is out of the question," Itachi stated, "He would frighten her with his self-chatter."

"And Hidan and Kakuzu both left two days ago," Konan said, a frown coming to her face, "but Hidan scares her the most, not to mention he's a bad influence. Kakuzu might've done it if we paid him, but it's a bad idea to send Hidan anywhere alone. Whole towns would be massacred."

Neither of them suggested getting Pain to watch her. He would be the best to suggest—he had numerous bodies at his disposal that could keep an eye on her. He could probably create another or spare one of his already existing bodies, it wouldn't be hard for him to watch her—one extra thing to keep an eye on in addition to watching the rest of the village. But the treatment Nariko would receive was questionable. She was already afraid of him, and his cold attitude would not tolerate her. He would most likely lock her up, and as a result, she would discover the truth—if she hadn't already. It was risky—Pain would have no trouble subduing her by himself, Nariko no match for the combined strength of his combined bodies. Nariko, barely aware of the world, still terribly naïve. Itachi wasn't consciously aware of it, but he thought, deep down, that leaving Nariko with Pain would be too cruel.

"What do you suggest, then?" Itachi asked Konan; he knew that either he would have to go alone, or he would have to wait for Kisame's return. But he wanted her to give him the answers, to recommend what he should do—he was half expecting her to suggest Pain to watch her. It was experimental; he had for a long time wondered if Konan had grown attached to the young Jinchuuriki. If she suggested Pain watch her, this would disprove his suspicions, but if she didn't say anything, his suspicions would grow. It didn't occur to Itachi that his own unwillingness to suggest Pain was a sign of his own attachment—an attachment he was unaware of.

Konan put her head on her desk, her forehead making a quiet 'thunk' sound. He mused slightly at this, wondering what all the other subordinates would think if they saw their cold, beautiful Angel banging her head on her desk.

"When is she supposed to be discharged from the hospital?" she asked, her voice muffled from her face being so close to the desk.

"Tomorrow," Itachi answered.

Konan was silent in speculation. She raised her head up again and looked at him. He returned her gaze steadily, wondering what she had finally concluded on. Her face looked a little grim, like she had a bad taste in her mouth at the idea, but could think of nothing else.

"Well, Pain won't like it—if he finds out, that is—but I suppose we could take her with us," she said slowly, "Do you think she's up for a two month journey?"

Itachi was surprised at the suggestion. He hadn't even considered taking Nariko along, mostly because it was as Konan said—Pain wouldn't be happy if he found out. Yet he could see nothing wrong with the proposition aside from that. Nariko hated Amegakure, and the place seemed to make her anxious. Perhaps being out of the village would calm her a little, and maybe it would cause the number of injuries she sustained to drop. He was still suspicious about them being deliberate.

"I believe she could make it," he said slowly, "The demon makes her very resilient, which is why she has survived a number of accidents."

"True enough," Konan agreed, straightening up in her chair; she sat still for a moment and then got up—she started to pace, "Pain's ignored her so far, so I don't know if he'll notice. I don't understand why he's done this, maybe because she's too innocent, or too harmless. I know he's had a lot going on—especially since he's been tracing the ever-elusive Yonbi. The closest we got was when we were in the Land of Earth, but then we were discovered by Konohagakure's shinobi and we had to leave and lie low. I almost wonder if he forgot about her."

Itachi closed his eyes, "No. To Kisame and I, he told us the upon our return from the Land of Waves, he wished to seal the Rokubi."

Itachi opened his eyes again when he heard Konan stop pacing; he studied her face for the slight muscle movements that would suggest what she was feeling. Konan was remarkably practiced in blanking her face though, and sometimes he could not read her face as well as other times. This was one of those times, though when she spoke her tone was light, nonchalant.

"Well, I guess that means that it's imperative that we don't lose her en route."

It took all of Nariko's willpower to restrain herself from prancing merrily through the puddles; she was so happy to be out of hospital, and now she got to travel out of the Village, too! She longed to see blue sky again after months of endless grey, and she had almost forgotten what it felt like to be completely dry. She wanted to see green trees, and grass, and flowers—none of it grew in Amegakure because all the plants were drowned. The only plant life she had seen was the green algae floating on puddles, or the half-drowned moss clinging desperately to a building. But now she was leaving it all behind! Her restraint failed, and she put a light bounce in her step.

"You seem excited, Kit," Flower-chan remarked, looking down to the Jinchuuriki from underneath a pointed straw hat.

Nariko giggled and twirled on the spot, rainwater flying off in different directions, "Yup! I'm happy to leave Amegakirai!"

Nariko heard a quiet amused 'hm' come from the other looming figure traveling with them. Itachi, too, was watching her from underneath a woven straw hat. Nariko grinned broadly. When Itachi had come to retrieve her from hospital, she was happy, but when he told her that she, Flower-chan, and himself would be taking a trip together to the ocean, there had been no way to describe how she felt. Excitement stemmed from more than one source. The fact that she had never seen the ocean before was one reason.

Her liveliness had not dampened now either, as she began to sing a little song to herself.

"Every single day, rain falls,

In Amegakure, that is.

It always has the same weather.

It's bad weather, isn't it?

My, my. What is this?

You want me to say

That I like the rain?

Sorry, but I can't.

Because the rain falls every day,

I've grown to hate the rain!"

Flower-chan laughed and clapped her hands in an appreciative manner, "Very nice, Kit."

Nariko did another little twirl and then a curtsy. She was pleased that Flower-chan liked the song; she had a feeling she would, because it seemed to her that Flower-chan hated the rain almost as much as Nariko did. She had liked rain before, but after it started raining all the time, she quickly grew tired of it. She still loved the white rain—even if it was really cold. Maybe she would see more white rain in the future.

"Ne? Will there be rain at the ocean? Or...snow?" Nariko asked curiously, falling back in step with Itachi and Flower-chan.

"There can be rain," Flower-chan answered, "But probably not any snow. It's the beginning of March, so in a country like the Wave

Country, it's early spring already. But it would be nice if it doesn't rain on us."

Nariko chewed on this bit of information for a bit—it sounded like it wouldn't be raining all the time if it did rain. She could handle that, she supposed, because at least she knew it would stop, and not on the decision of the leader.

"Why are we going to the ocean?" she asked curiously; she had a feeling that it had something to do with Akatsuki, and it put her ill at ease thinking about it.

She was glad to be out of Amegakure, so her question didn't convey her doubts, but she was afraid that maybe another Jinchuuriki might come to an end as a result of this trip. But no matter, she also had a different plan. The fact that she was traveling with Flower-chan and Itachi made her very hopeful—she hadn't forgotten her secret desire to run away with the two of them, living outside the influence of the Leader and far away from his endless rain. She would have some time to manage to convince them, and figure out a way to bring it up. But she figured it would be safer to know why they were going anyway.

Nariko saw out of the corner of her eye that Itachi and Flower-chan exchanged glances—Flower-chan looked apprehensive. Nariko pretended not to notice, but she felt that her suspicions were headed in the right direction. It was Itachi who answered her question.

"In the Land of Waves, we have been told that a demon, like the one you possess is out in the ocean," Itachi said, looking at her from under his straw hat, "This demon is free, and without a host—if it once had a host, it has managed to escape, or perhaps nobody has ever managed to seal it inside someone."

"In any case, that's what we're going there for," Flower-chan said slowly, and Nariko was aware of the investigative look she was receiving.

"We want to capture this demon as it is," Itachi continued, "That way, it will never be put inside a host, who will only be hated and despised by those around them."

Nariko nervously held Itachi's gaze for a moment; slowly she nodded and then looked away again. She kept her eyes on the path ahead—a path only marked by stone—the muddy path looked like the rest of the landscape around them. She was contemplative about the manner—did she believe what Itachi had told her? No, not all of it. Or rather, she didn't trust anything he told her anymore, and knew to treat each bit of information with doubt. The thing was, everything Itachi told her sounded reasonable, so the matter was trying to find where the lies were. Whatever the truth was, she'd find it.

But either way, lies or not, she vowed that she would never go back to Amegakure, and that she would never let Flower-chan or Itachi be influenced by the Leader ever again. This opportunity was their only chance to live the perfect life they all deserved.

It was the morning after Team Seven returned home from their weeklong mission that Sakura approached Sasuke; she was carrying a large cardboard box, that by the looks of it was very heavy. He was sitting at the kitchen table, sorting through the mail that they had received while away, and he couldn't help but raise his eyebrows at her. She smiled.

"You busy?" she asked him, adjusting the weight of the box on her hip.

"Not particularly," he said; most of the mail they received was junk mail—he usually dealt with it by stuffing it back through the mail slot, "Why?"

"Come with me to the training grounds," Sakura said, her grin broadening, "I've come up with a way to help train your Sharingan."

Sasuke was surprised, but without a moment to lose, he was ready to go. He followed her out of the village to the wide wooded areas that were the training grounds; a couple of times he asked her what was in the box, but she refused to tell him; he would find out, she told him the first time. He would see, was what she said the second time. So he gave up on asking and started guessing in his mind. Maybe it was medical equipment, specially suited for this sort of thing. Or maybe it was books—optical illusions or something meant to stimulate his eyes. But he only found out what was in the box when they actually arrived at Training Ground Six. All his guesses were wrong.

Sakura set down the box, and pried the lid open. What Sasuke saw inside was neither books nor equipment, nor anything particularly amazing. What was inside was a set of dishes. They weren't even all that nice—they were hand painted, porcelain, poor quality, and cheap looking.

Sakura smiled again, this time it was a little mischievous, secretive, "This are my mother's hand-painted china set—a family heirloom since my great grandmother. Completely irreplaceable."

Sasuke's eyebrows shot up. They looked like they could be that old, but Sasuke wouldn't have guessed that they were such priceless relics in Sakura's household. Furthermore, he couldn't guess what she was hoping to do with them.

"Why did you bring them out here?" he asked her, looking away from the dishes and at her.

"You'll see," she said, smiling lightly, "Go stand over there."

She indicated with her chin; face marred with confusion, Sasuke did as she asked and shuffled a few meters away from her.

"Farther," she instructed.

He went back another ten meters.

"Alright!" Sakura called, bending down and pulling out what looked like an ancient teacup, "Catch!"

Sasuke's eyes widened in horror as she took the priceless teacup and threw it in his general direction. His general direction meaning that she was facing him when she threw it, other than that, the throw had absolutely no accuracy. He sprinted; watching the cup as it spun through the air; he extended his hands as he came closer to it. His fingertips brushed it, he fumbled slightly—then he made a desperate grab for it, and...he caught it. His heart was racing, mostly from being startled and the shock of almost having something so important broken. He whirled on Sakura; who was now holding what looked like a bowl.

"Are you crazy?" he yelled over to her, "Using your *mother's* heirlooms to strengthen—"

"You won't drop any," she said happily, "Next one!"

He had no choice; he barely had time to put the china cup down on the ground before he tore after the bowl. He was driving his legs as hard as he could, again watching the bowl as closely as he could. He almost didn't make it; he had to leap out to grab the bowl, skidding across the ground on his stomach. No sooner had he caught the bowl than another cup went flying; he had to jump in the air to catch this one, or it would have gone soaring off behind him. He dropped the cup on a patch of grass before running after a third cup. He didn't have time to think about anything—like how Sakura must be out of her mind, like how her mother would probably be extremely upset with him if he dropped one, or how he didn't know what he would do if he let one break. He just ran.

"Go long!" Sakura said as he caught the teacup; she had in her hand a plate, and as soon as he looked up, she threw it backhand, like it was a Frisbee.

He caught that one fairly easily, and again, he didn't have much time to put it down on the ground before having to chase another piece of

tableware. Sakura didn't make it easy on him either; she was throwing each object so carelessly, like she didn't care if it hit the ground. No, she was just placing that much trust in him that he would catch them. As if it wasn't hard enough to catch the flying dishes, she started using chakra in her arm while throwing them. The increased power in the throw forced him to move faster—it got so that he had to know almost exactly where it was going to fall otherwise he would miss it entirely.

It probably only took fifteen minutes to discharge all the dishes, but it seemed like forever for Sasuke. After the last of the plates had been thrown, she helped him collect all the dishes back to the box. He was shaking, he realized as he gathered up the scattered bowls and cups—had he not been in such a state of shock, it probably would have amused him that chasing after Sakura's mother's heirlooms was giving him more of an adrenaline rush than fighting in the Chuunin Exam had.

He delicately put the dishes back in the box, and then straightened up to look at Sakura. She was holding a teacup idly in her hand, looking vaguely inattentive. He could only feel disbelief.

"Sakura, these are your mother's—!" he started, but never finished.

"Whoops!" Sakura said, tossing the teacup into the air off to the left.

Reflexively, he dove for it. And then it happened all over again. He was barely able to keep up this time—Sakura was throwing with more vigor. The only thing that Sasuke could come up with to explain her behaviour was that she hated the heirlooms and was hoping he would drop them, but if he didn't, her mother would be none the wiser and he would benefit from it.

That was when he dropped the first dish. He was moving virtually as fast as he could, but he arrived a tenth of a second too late. A mere three inches from his fingertips, he watched, as if in slow motion, as the teacup tumbled just beyond his reach. Slowly, slowly, slowly, rotating in the air, turning, round and around...the butt end of the cup

was hurtling towards the ground. It hit the corner of a rock that was slightly protruding out of the ground, two inches short of a soft grassy patch. He watched as the impact of the rock sent a force through the cup, and then, still in slow motion, he witnessed the little cup come apart like it was exploding, the shards flying up, out, and then down on the ground like a little china halo.

The shattering sound resounded in the air. Sasuke froze, his hands outstretched, still grasping for the cup that had just broken at his feet; his eyes were glued on the pieces remaining on the ground. He'd broken a cup. He'd let it slip by. It was destroyed, unfixable. What would Sakura's mother say? What would she think? Sakura would be moving out within the hour. His imagination went wild, each thought worse than the last.

"Good thing we have two spare teacups," he heard Sakura say, like she was far away; the word 'spare' echoed loudly, like a thundering gong, "But we don't have any extra plates."

He snapped his head towards Sakura just as she threw the plate. He had to move, he couldn't let this one fall; if it fell, he was done for. His eyes were glued to the plate; he knew that the point of this exercise was to force his Sharingan to come into use. He was seeing it's effects already, the plate was moving slower in his mind's eye... just a little more, he needed a little more...insight... If only he could...

He blinked, only once. But he never opened his eyes after that. He closed his eyes in that blink to activate his Sharingan. He knew how, he had done it hundreds of thousands of times before—he would force it to work. He had to. But the instant he force activated it, a searing pain went through his eyes—a burn, like his eyes were hot with pain. He never opened his eyes from the blink. A shout of pain escaped him the same time, as he stumbled. His shoulder hit the ground; his hands went to his eyes—to accomplish what, he didn't know.

He heard Sakura's shout come just before the plate shattered in the background. Despite the pain, he still felt a sinking feeling in his stomach; the plate was broken now. He heard Sakura's footsteps run up next to him and he felt her hand on his shoulder as she knelt down next to him. She took his hands away from his eyes, holding his wrists firmly. It hurt so much—not as badly as when he took the kunai to himself, but it would have to come second.

"Sasuke!" she called his name, her voice sounded desperate, "Sasuke! Look at me, please! Why won't you look at me?"

What was she talking about? He pried his eyelids open to squint at her—or he tried to, at least. But his eyes were already open, and he couldn't see anything. The world was black.

A/N: evil [ee-vuhl] - **adjective**

1. morally wrong or bad; immoral; wicked: *evil deeds; an evil life*
2. harmful; injurious: *evil laws.*
3. due to actual or imputed bad conduct or character: *an evil reputation*
4. marked by anger, irritability, irascibility, etc.: *He is known for his evil disposition*

Example: ObsidianSickle

(cackles)

Chapter 63

A/N: Because you've all been waiting for this for a week, I'm going to deliberately delay you with a super-long author's note. Just kidding.
:p

Chapter Sixty-Three: The Unanswerable Question

His head was rested in Sakura's lap, the soft grass under his back, the wind on his skin, Sakura's hands were on his face, his eyes were aching... He could feel the pain ebb and flow as Sakura applied healing chakra, soothing the pain away. Closing his eyes, he breathed deeply. He wasn't using anything to see at the moment, he left his chakra senses deactivated—he didn't want to further remind himself of what just happened. Neither of them said anything for a long time—Sasuke was afraid to ask what the verdict was. He had brought this on himself.

Approximately twenty minutes later, the pain had subsided entirely, and Sakura moved her hands away from his head, placing them gently on his shoulders instead. He exhaled slowly.

"Well?" he asked heavily, bracing himself.

"It's hard to say," Sakura said slowly, remorsefully, "The action of force-activating your Sharingan shouldn't have caused the sort of damage that would erase your vision. I think you just...overloaded your eyes, for a lack of a better way of putting it. I think as a result, they shut down—probably temporarily. I can't imagine this being long-term. The cells are functioning fine, so there's nothing I can really do. We can only wait and hope there's no permanent damage."

Heavy silence.

"Sasuke, I'm so sorry," Sakura said finally—it sounded like she was going to cry; activating his senses he confirmed this. Her eyes were brimmed with tears that had yet to fall.

" *You're* sorry?" he asked, astounded; he stumbled on the words trying to get them out all at once, "I broke—heirlooms—your mother's—priceless, hand-painted— *two* of them!"

Sakura's face changed to that of guilty embarrassment. "I'm sorry," she repeated; Sasuke couldn't tell, but he was certain she was probably looking away from him, "They weren't priceless heirlooms... I actually bought them this morning at a second hand shop."

He sat up abruptly, turning around so that his face was towards her, "They're *secondhand* ?"

Sakura was definitely looking guilty now, not just nervous-guilty, but deep-seeded guilt. Her face was slightly turned away. She was trying to avoid his nonexistent gaze, "How else was I supposed to get you to seriously run after cheap dishes? It was the only way that I could think of to get you to make sure that none of them broke."

He just stared at her, dumbfounded. Or at least, did his best—he knew he looked dumbfounded at least.

"I'm so sorry, Sasuke," she said, daring to look at him again, "I didn't think something like this would happen. If I had, then I wouldn't have —"

"I'm not mad," he interrupted. He really wasn't. He could have been —might've been, once upon a time. He was just annoyed, but not irritated annoyed, he was affectionately annoyed.

"You're not?" she sounded genuinely surprised.

"No. I could be, but I'm not," he answered, shaking his head with amused disbelief. And then he tackled her, with that affectionate sort of annoyed attitude, " *Secondhand* ?"

He could clobber her, he thought to himself, making him run around, scaring him half to death with secondhand dishes. All that worrying about falling out of favor with Sakura's family, and her moving out all on account of breaking some 'family heirlooms'. He just couldn't believe it, everything that had happened as a result. He fell down beside her, and then he started to chuckle despite himself. The chuckle continued, until he was chortling at the irony of all that had happened. He put his hand to his forehead, shaking his head a little. Sakura was staring at him, her pupil-less eyes wide with silent disbelief. She didn't say anything until his quiet laughter had died to a wry smile.

"When you laugh with that smirk of yours, it looks like you're laughing evilly," she said, sounding like she was saying things carefully, "I feel like I'm in trouble."

"You should be," he reassured her, and then he tried to put words to his frustration, "You're just so...annoying!"

Putting his arm around her waist he pulled her close to him so she couldn't escape. He pinched her arm in retaliation. He smirked at her surprised yelp, but he only pinched her the one time. He wasn't angry with her (he didn't really understand why) so he had no reason to take anything out on her—not that he wanted to.

"I'm sorry if this isn't apparent already," she said, rubbing her arm where he had pinched it, "but I'm just a little bit surprised you're not more upset about losing your sight again..."

He paused while thinking about it, his thoughts turning serious at the same time. "When I took my sight, I was prepared to never see again," he said slowly, "I was grateful enough for my chakra senses. I thought I would walk the world in darkness for the rest of my life. But you returned my sight to me, you brought light and colour back into my world. Having been able to see these short past months is something I never expected to happen. To be blind again is nothing, because for one last time, I was allowed to see."

"But it might only be tempor—" Sakura tried to reassure him, but he interrupted her again.

"I know," he moved his head into the crook of her neck, smelling the vanilla scent of her hair, "I trust you. But even if I were to again lose my sight forever, I would be satisfied, because I *did* get to see the colour of the sunset, the picture of my family, and the smile on your face."

His forehead was brushed gently up against her cheek, and he felt the surface temperature grow warmer. He smirked against the loose strands of her hair.

"It seems that whether I can see or not, I can still tell when you're blushing."

Traveling out of Ame and into the Land of Fire was a dangerous business to begin with. For starters, since Konoha was probably the greatest of the Five Great Shinobi Villages and kept its borders pretty heavily guarded, not in a hostile manner, but they were fastidious with their paperwork. The only way for Akatsuki members to go through was to cross illegally (they were missing ninja, so it didn't really matter to them anyways) outside of a checkpoint. Not only was crossing into the Fire Country difficult and dangerous, but the easiest route to the Land of Waves came dangerously close to Konoha. They would have to be careful, and on their toes.

This was Konan's first time traveling with Itachi for a long period of time, which meant things were much different in terms of traveling for her. Normally, she would simply scatter as paper in the wind, soaring high above the designated checkpoints. She could maintain her paper form for a long time, and usually would traverse over countries by this method. But Itachi and Nariko were not capable of this feat, so it would have to be done Itachi's way.

Actually, Konan was interested in what Itachi would do for the border crossing. She knew of the existence of a number of small roads that

were used by Akatsuki to cross. The increased number of roads ensured that if one was discovered, that there would be other means to travel into the country. Which of these paths Itachi would take, she did not know—she had never needed to use them herself, and had never actually been to one. Though as they traveled along, she understood why it would be easier for grounded criminals to use these secret roads.

The terrain had morphed quite a bit, and as they drew away from Pain's endless rain—breaching the end of his control—the landscape started to roll with hills, and soon, there was lush green grass, followed by trees and other greenery. The moisture in the air was at a level where it would not destroy the plant life but sustain it exceedingly. The flora was dense and thick, and it was difficult to see beyond a certain point. It would provide nice cover.

It took a day for them to leave Pain's rains behind. And it took another day to reach the border. The Land of Rain was a small county, so it didn't take long to travel anywhere, and because of this, there were numerous wayside inns along the major roadways, which weren't that far apart from one another. The end of the second night, they stopped at one of the wayside inns along the road, knowing that the next morning, they would have to make the crossing of the border.

Akatsuki was well known in the Land of Rain, and was also well respected. Because of Pain, the economy had recovered dramatically after he had overthrown the Amekage. At their first sighting, the landlord was quick to give them the two best rooms in the inn at a reduced rate. Nariko and Konan were to share a room while Itachi had the one down the hall to himself.

The first night they had camped outside, which Nariko had been very enthusiastic about, but she was equally excited as she entered the large room. She let out a delighted squeal and ran across the room, leaping on one of the two beds, bouncing up and down on the white linen. Konan laughed while dumping her backpack down beside the door.

"I will go unpack," Itachi said, glancing once into the room, looking at Nariko as she buried her face into a feather pillow.

"Right," Konan answered once before closing the door behind him, "Kit, don't bounce too much, you are a lot heavier than you think—you might break the bed."

"I won't break it, Flower-chan," Nariko answered with a goofy grin—Konan had tried to get Nariko to call her something else, but after being called 'Flower-chan' so long, it sounded strange to be called anything but.

"Just be careful, okay?" Konan warned, as she took off her shoes.

There was silence for a time while Konan unpacked her backpack, pulling out her toothbrush and other toiletries and putting them in the bathroom. When she came out, Nariko was sitting cross-legged on the bed, staring thoughtfully out the window, her arms wrapped around her pillow. Konan glanced out of the window to see what she was looking at, but could only see treetops and scattered cloud.

"Ne, Flower-chan?" Nariko said after a while, "Why aren't we camping outside again tonight?"

"Well, Kit, camping is fun the first few times you try it," Konan replied, lying back on her own bed, propping the pillow up against the headboard, "After a while, you get so you prefer to sleep in a bed with a roof over your head."

"Will we be camping again anytime soon?" Nariko asked, looking away from the window and at Konan.

Konan gave a wry smile, "Oh yes, Kit, we will be doing *lots* of camping on this trip."

"Really?" Nariko asked, her eyes all lit-up and excited, "Even thought you don't like it?"

"Yes, even though I don't like it," Konan grinned—it was like having a conversation with a child sometimes, "There will be some places where it would be better if we didn't stay in an inn."

"Oh?" Nariko sounded a little bit surprised, "Why is that?"

"Well, let me put it this way, Kit," Konan said thoughtfully, "Some places you go in the world, people won't like you, or you did something they didn't like. So you're not welcome there because you're different or not liked. If people don't like you, it's usually better if you avoid being where they are."

"Oh, okay," was all that Nariko said in response, before falling back on the bed and curling around the pillow she was clutching.

Konan was a little glad that Nariko had not pressed the issue—she didn't know how much more she wanted to say, or if she should say anything more on the matter. She wasn't sure if she had said too much already, but Nariko hadn't asked about who disliked them, so it was probably for the better. Unless, of course, she had some inkling of what sort of people they really were. Closing her eyes and reflecting on it, it wouldn't be too hard to guess that not everyone liked Akatsuki, especially after what Nariko had seen of Hidan.

There was a light knock on the door, and Konan unwillingly pried her eyes open again, and then proceeded to force her body to stand up again. She was more tired than she realized, and she was finding it would have been nice if she could have caught a little shuteye. But regardless, she wandered over to the door and opened it, to see Itachi standing stoically on the other side of the door.

"I was hoping we could discuss tonight which route we want to take to cross the border," he said without any hint of emotion on his face.

A coy smile involuntarily came to Konan's face. "My goodness, how bold, Itachi, visiting the women's room, unaccompanied," she teased, but she opened the door wide and let him anyways.

He walked in without comment, and for an instant, Konan wished that he would show at least *some* emotion from time to time. Sometimes, she felt that her comments were completely disregarded, or that Itachi was deaf. She locked the door behind them, and Itachi went over to the small two-person table and took out what looked like a map from his sleeve. Konan glanced at Nariko who was curled up on the bed, but seemed to have fallen asleep; smiling slightly, she shook her head.

"I figure I should tell you that I've never actually crossed the border through one of Akatuski's paths," Konan said, coming over to the table and sliding neatly into the chair opposite from Itachi.

He looked up at her, his eyebrows raised ever so slightly, "Never?"

She shook her head, "No. For me, it's a bit easier. Disguise myself as a stack of paper sitting on a cart, and once the cart is over the border, or even before then, I just wait for a suitable wind gust that makes my flight across the landscape look natural. Quite a few people have chased my stray sheets, but nobody has actually caught me. It's easier than sneaking around conspicuously."

Itachi looked mildly interested by this concept, and then he turned back to the map, "As you can see, this is a map of the eastern border. As you know, the main crossing point is on the main road and it is approximately placed where the Land of Rain sticks out the furthest. Now, on either side of the checkpoint, there two paths, making four paths in total. Two years ago, the first one to the north was discovered, and has since been abandoned by Akatsuki, as you know."

Konan nodded. That was another thing she was required to do in Amegakure, keep track of what secrets of theirs had been found. She remembered the incident in which the path had been found quite well—it had caused a lot of grief trying to cover up their tracks to make it impossible to trace to the other three paths.

"The one most traveled is the one to the south of the checkpoint—with eyes turned north, it would make sense to take a path to the south," Itachi continued, "The far northern path is also undiscovered, but as it is the farthest away from all the rest, very few people use it. Additionally, the road it leads up to is very close to Konoha."

"What about the path to the far south?" she asked, looking at the map. It looked like it actually went through where the Land of Rain's, the Land of Rivers', and the Land of Fire's borders intersected.

"That is the path that I had hoped we would take," Itachi stated, "The terrain is a slightly difficult, but Kisame and I prefer that path, and I know it well. It crosses two major rivers—the Runoff River, from the Rain Country, and the Firehole River from the Fire Country."

Konan didn't say anything. She wasn't good with water, but she could use her paper ninjutsu to help her fly across, and that way, she wouldn't get wet. She was fine with difficult—she had grown up putting up with difficult and impossible. Like any wartime refugee, she could deal with almost anything now.

"What about Nariko?" she asked, glancing over at the sleeping girl.

"I believe she will not find it too trying," Itachi replied impassively.

"Of course, you know her better than anyone else," Konan remarked offhandedly, reclining back in her seat. Itachi nodded absently.

There was silence for a period of time—nothing was said between the both of them. But even though there were no words, they held each other's gazes evenly. Konan always found looking at Itachi's Sharingan oddly calming—she had heard others say that they found Itachi's red-eyed gaze unnerving, as if it could read into their soul. But Konan felt differently. When held under the spell of those captivating blood-red eyes, she felt that they could see a part of her soul that nobody else could—and instead of unnerved, she felt calmed by that. That at least someone else, aside from herself, could

see and understand that part of her. There was only one other person who had looked at her that way, and that had been Yahiko.

After a time, Itachi looked away, and rose to his feet, breaking the spell. Konan rose to her feet as well.

"I should retire for the evening," Itachi said quietly.

"It'll be a difficult trek tomorrow," Konan agreed, meandered over to the door, opening it for him.

"I will see you in the morning," Itachi told her as he walked out, and then turned towards her. He took her hand in his and placed a kiss on the back of it, holding her gaze for an instant. A crooked grin came to her face, one not born entirely out of indifference. He let her hand drop, and then glanced one final time over her shoulder at the sleeping Nariko.

"Goodnight," he said smoothly before turning and ambling down the hall towards his room.

The very next morning, Sakura and Sasuke stood in front of Tsunade, Sasuke's arm linked with Sakura's. Even though Sasuke wasn't mad at her, she was feeling exceedingly guilty about what happened—despite Sasuke's assurances it wasn't her fault. She felt that it was her responsibility to report to Tsunade about what had happened and appraise the Hokage of her personal assessment, in addition to that of the optometrist she had taken Sasuke to see yesterday evening (Sasuke had insisted that it was not necessary just as much as she had insisted it was). It would be unfair to all the clients if they weren't aware of the situation.

"But we're hoping the effects are only temporary," Sakura emphasized for the third time; if Sasuke hadn't linked his arm with hers, she would have been wringing her hands excessively, "But neither of this think that this will affect the missions we're being

commissioned to do. After all, they were impressed with him fighting blindfolded..."

Tsunade, who had remained mostly silent until that point, looked over at Sasuke, "Uchiha, do you believe that your current state will affect your performance on missions?"

"Not adversely," Sasuke answered with a shrug, "But if I were required to perform tasks that included identification through colour, I would find it difficult."

"So we can't go and critique paintings," Sakura offered with a weak smile.

Tsunade was silent for a moment, "I was hoping to assign Team Seven to another mission in the near future...It'll be a shorter mission—only four days. You would be keeping watch over the rice storehouse of a local village whose regular guard has to attend a relative's funeral. It's the remainder of the village's supplies. They have had problems with thieves in the past, but nothing recent."

"Watching rice by night?" Sakura asked—the mission was obviously C-ranked. The only reason it wasn't D-ranked was because of the threat of potential thieves, "Sasuke would be best out of all of us. He'd sense any thieves before they got close—assuming it's his shift to take watch."

"I thought as much," Tsunade answered, "I'll give you the mission information now, while you're here, and I'll send a copy to Naruto. You won't be leaving for three days, so that'll present the opportunity to see whether your hypothesis is correct about Sasuke's current state of vision."

"Thank you, Tsunade-sama, for understanding our predicament," Sakura said with a slight bow. She was relieved that Team Seven wouldn't be recalled until they discovered the nature of what was going on with Sasuke's vision.

Tsunade smiled then, shaking her head, "Sakura, you seem to have forgotten that I, too, was watching Sasuke's performance in the Chuunin Exam."

Beside her, she saw Sasuke smirk.

Over the next few days Sakura kept a careful watch over Sasuke's eyes, but in his opinion, she needn't have bothered. The next morning when he opened his eyes in the morning, he sat up so abruptly that he accidentally woke Sakura as well. He spent the next five minutes waving his hand in front of his face, watching as the light filtered through his fingers.

He could see the light changes early that morning, but by mid-afternoon, he could begin to distinguish certain shadows. The next morning, he could tell shapes and see certain colours quite distinctly, only to get better by the end of the day. Sakura was quite relieved by the progress at which his eyes were recovering on their own, and didn't seem to feel as badly about what happened—Sasuke on the other had had a feeling that his eyes weren't as damaged as Sakura thought they had been.

The morning before they were supposed to leave before the mission, Sasuke's symptoms similar to that of someone who was badly nearsighted—or at least according to Sakura. And by the end of the day, he could see clearly things that were up to five meters away, though Sakura was still displaying minor concern. She suggested that maybe for the mission he might want to wear a pair of glasses. He flatly refused.

The question still remained: was there any damage to Sasuke's Sharingan? There was no way of telling within the time frame before the mission; Sakura was talking about scientific tests within a controlled environment. She even suggested that maybe they would have to find a replacement team to go on their mission. This was met with complaints. Naruto for one was eager to go on the mission, C-rank or not. But Sasuke thought Sakura was surprised when he, too,

objected. Sasuke told her that his vision was undamaged, and that was enough for the time being. The testing could wait until they got back.

So, without another word on the matter, Sakura let it go. And the three of them set out to the town, which was a day's walk away. They were greeted by the gate guards, who took them to the mayor, who in turn took them to a small cottage. The cottage belonged to the guard who was normally posted watching the rice by night, and the guard's wife, who thanked them tremendously for accepting the task, greeted Team Seven. They were all then treated to a homemade lunch.

The wife led them later that afternoon to the storage buildings where the rice was kept and stayed with them until they knew the layout of the surrounding land, asking her questions and so forth. She then bade them farewell and said if they needed anything, to come back to the house and ask. She then took her leave, leaving Team Seven alone in the shadows of the three towering grain elevators.

"Well, here we are," Naruto exclaimed, falling back on the ground, his backpack cushioning him, "for the next four stinking days!"

"Come on, Naruto," Sakura said disapprovingly, "It won't be so bad. You did bring stuff to do while we're out here, right?"

"Um..."

"Idiot," Sasuke stated with a smirk.

"Hey! You watch it, teme!" Naruto exclaimed, leaping to his feet and pointing a finger at Sasuke, "I don't need to bring things to do, because I'll be too busy fighting rice thieves!"

"Please, dobe," Sasuke snorted, rolling his eyes, "It's hardly likely we'll have to fight anyone."

"See! That's why you'll never be as good as me!" Naruto declared, "because you slack off!"

"I am not slacking off," Sasuke retorted with a glare, "We could run into some thieves, but I'm saying it's unlikely."

"Alright, break it up, you two," Sakura said putting her hands on her hips, "We need to at least plan camp."

Both Naruto and Sasuke held each other's gaze in a death glare for a full three seconds before looking away and letting the matter go. Sakura was right, Sasuke knew, it would be best at least to have camp prepared. He firmly ignored Naruto.

"The weather's quite mild, now that it's March—spring is already settling in. So I very much doubt we'll get rained on. I don't think that a tent is necessary," Sakura said thoughtfully, "The issue is mostly where do we want to set up camp?"

"Probably in the center of the three grain elevators—the triangular positioning makes it ideal for defensive purposes," Sasuke suggested, "What about shifts?"

"Anosa, I don't mind taking first shift!" Naruto volunteered.

"I'll take middle shift," Sasuke said, before Sakura could, remembering the last time they had been calling shifts. Tokugawa Manzo had told them to stop bickering like a married couple, Sasuke remembered all too clearly.

"I guess that leaves last shift for me," Sakura said with a smile, "During the day we won't be doing much in the way of strenuous activity, so I think we can all afford to take naps if necessary."

And that was that. They spread out the bedrolls, and gathered firewood. They spent the day preparing and listening for trouble, though all of them knew that it was even less likely that they would encounter bandits in broad daylight. The weather was warm, and the atmosphere was cheerful. Laughter and smiles came quickly and easily—from Naruto and Sakura—and a number of times, Sakura commented that Sasuke almost succeeded in smiling. Naruto

thought it would be amusing to come up behind Sasuke and pull his lips into a smile. Sasuke on the other hand thought it wasn't so funny. Naruto got an excellently executed back fist blow to the nose.

"Dammit, teme, you gave me a freaking nosebleed!" Naruto cursed, holding his nose while trying to stem a waterfall of blood.

"It was your own fault, dobe!" Sasuke argued back with irritation.

Again, Sakura had to intervene. She fixed up Naruto's nose quickly and berated them both. Naruto was then so grumpy with Sasuke that he refused to speak to Sasuke for the rest of the evening, which Sasuke just considered an added bonus to the satisfaction of getting to give Naruto a bleeding nose. They rotated shifts throughout the night without incident, and the next morning, Naruto was cheerful and bright. It seemed like he had completely forgotten that Sasuke had hit him in the nose only yesterday.

The next day passed with out incident as well—the weather stayed fine, and each team member, except for Naruto, worked on something they brought. Sakura was reading a book titled *Things You Didn't Know about the Five Great Shinobi Villages*, which was filled with little interesting info bits about the other villages. She would sometimes read aloud segments of it to them if she found something particularly interesting. Like how in the first construction of Kumogakure, there were so many lightning storms that it burned down the Raikage's building in less than an hour, or that in the Hidden Sand Village, the sandstorms can get so vicious that they experience days without sunlight.

Sasuke spent most of the time sharpening his weapons meticulously, as many of them had gotten dull from frequent use. He paid careful attention to his katana, which he sharpened in an almost loving manner—when his sight had come clear again, he had discovered his mother's name inscribed on the base of the blade. Upon further research, he discovered his mother had been one of Konoha's best katana users, and only quit shinobi life when she was pregnant with

Itachi. He was using his mother's katana, and Sasuke treated it like a treasure.

Day faded to night, and again they took shifts, but this time switching it up, to make it fair. This time Sasuke took first shift and Naruto took middle. Sakura still had last shift, but it was decided that she would have first shift the next night, and first shift on the last.

Naruto and Sakura got ready for bed and then crawled into their respective bedrolls, leaving Sasuke awake, to watch over camp for the next few hours. There was nothing amiss, nothing afoot, he was sensing for chakra signatures that would not come. He could only sense Naruto and Sakura's signatures, dormant in their sleep. He couldn't even sense the signature of the woman that had led them out there—the cottage was out of range.

The only chakra activity that Sasuke sensed was when Naruto woke up spontaneously, hours before his shift. Sasuke stared at him quizzically from his spot until Naruto muttered something about bushes—Sasuke just rolled his eyes then as Naruto stumbled off out of the light of the campfire. Sasuke disregarded the groggy blond, and tried shifting his weight to get in a more comfortable position. Even if there were only a few hours left of his shift, he wasn't looking forward to two more shifts over the next two days. It was obvious that there was absolutely nothing out of the ordinary. Nobody was going to steal any rice—he was pretty certain of that. Whatever history they had with thieves were probably some wandering vagabonds who were hard up and needed something to eat.

Sasuke sighed and stretched, stiff from sitting, despite the shift in his weight. He got up and wandered around the perimeter of camp, stretching his legs. He glanced at the moon to guess the approximate time and figure out how long until Naruto's shift. Not soon enough, was all he deduced, coming to a stop. Wandering over to the fire, he sat down, grabbing a couple logs and tossing them on. The light in the camp brightened as the logs flared up, and in the dancing light, Sasuke noticed Sakura.

She was deep in sleep, curled up with her blanket pulled up to her chin. He watched as the firelight danced over her body, the only movement being the rise and fall of her chest under the covers. A clump of hair had fallen loose and was splayed out all over her face. Slowly, he shuffled over to where she was, and reaching carefully, so as not to wake her, he brushed the hair back and tucked it behind her ear.

"...mm...Sa...suke..." she murmured in her sleep, but he could tell that she was still asleep—her chakra signature was quietly flickering, like flames over the hot coals of a fire.

"You are such a creeper, Sasuke," Naruto said quietly, wandering back into camp, scratching the back of his head; Sasuke froze—he had known Naruto was coming back, but it hadn't occurred to him that Naruto would see what he had just done, "If Sakura-chan had woken up just then, you'd be toast."

"She wasn't going to wake up," Sasuke answered astutely, just as quietly as Naruto, "Her chakra signature is still dormant."

"You can tell when people are awake or asleep?" Naruto asked in a hushed voice, moving to his bedroll, and then sitting cross-legged on it, "You could be such a super-stalker, you creeper!"

"I am not a creeper," Sasuke snapped back as quietly as he could.

"Uh-huh. Says the guy who tucks girls' hair behind their ears while he's one hundred percent sure they're sleeping," Naruto whispered, sounding skeptical.

"I didn't do it only because I knew she was fully asleep," Sasuke growled; he could feel the warmth on the back of his neck, "Even if she was half-asleep, it wouldn't have mattered."

"How do you figure?"

"What do you mean?"

"If Sakura-chan was half asleep and you did what you just did," Naruto whispered slowly, "She'd pummel you for being a creeper and touching her while she's trying to sleep."

"She wouldn't pummel me," Sasuke whispered defensively, "She's —"

He cut himself short. 'Used to it' was what he was going to say. But he figured he'd said too much already. Not only did he already have tabs kept on him by Sakura's family—which hadn't entirely gone away, even if they had for the time being—he didn't need Naruto to find out that he slept beside her each night. Naruto would be on his case just as bad as Sakura's family would be. It would be bad all the way around

"She's what?" Naruto pressed, leaning forwards to better hear.

"She loves me," Sasuke mended—or tried to. It sounded like a lousy patch job even to his own ears.

"So...what? That makes it okay?" Naruto snickered, "Creeeepppeeerrr!"

"I am *not* a creeper!" Sasuke hissed.

"Whatever you say, teme, whatever you say," Naruto grinned.

"Shut up, dobe."

Silence ensued, and finally Sasuke looked away into the fire. What he really wanted to look at was Sakura's face, but Naruto would only further tease him about the current predicament if he did so. He wasn't a creeper. He definitely wasn't. He didn't need to be. He already had the closest access to Sakura out of anyone in the village, yet it didn't matter to him.

Sure he probably knew some things about Sakura that maybe even her family didn't know about her. Like how when she hugged him her

arms would hold him like he would slip away from her, or how when she comforted him at night she would whisper his name when she thought he was still asleep, or that when she brushed his hair out of *his* eyes, he felt like she was smoothing away the worries of his life.

But it wasn't only things like that, but also little habits and movements. Her family would probably take note of many of them, like how she sucked on the end of her pen when she pondered over what to write, or when she was particularly cheerful, there would be a bounce in her step. But even he knew some things nobody else would, like what brand of feminine hygiene products she used, or that sometimes when she slept, the spaghetti strap of her pajamas would sometimes slip off, revealing a smooth shoulder, which many men would die to see. Upon reflection, Sasuke realized with sudden horror, he shouldn't know those things either. They were true, but he shouldn't be *aware* of them. The thought that maybe he *was* a creeper was deeply unsettling.

"Oi, Sasuke," Naruto hailed, lying back on his bedroll and staring up at the stars, "There's something I've been wondering for a bit... Sakura's still asleep right?"

Sasuke glanced over at Naruto. Perhaps if he weren't so unsettled by his own observations, he would have given Naruto a snide comment about who the 'creeper' really was. Instead, he just gave a nod.

"Aa."

"Okay," Naruto said nodding, "I remember I asked you this before, but I'm only asking again, 'cause I can't say that I believe you anymore. Are you in love with Sakura-chan?"

From where Sasuke was sitting, he froze for the second time that night. His brain refused to function for a moment—stalling all his thoughts that had led up to Naruto's question. He wasn't quite sure what he was expecting Naruto to ask him, but it wasn't that. No, could he honestly say that he thought Naruto wouldn't ask him

something of the sort? No, he was, in a way, expecting it and not expecting it.

"I beg your pardon?" Sasuke spluttered, keeping his voice down. He wasn't angry so much from the question, as he was defensive because the question had caught him off guard.

"Are you in love with Sakura-chan?" Naruto repeated clearly.

Sasuke had no doubts about the question now. It was perfectly clear what was being asked of him. He didn't look at Naruto, but instead stared at the fire. The question was so simple, yet the answer was so hard. Last time the answer had come so easily out of his mouth, slipping out without a second thought. Yet now, as he tried to answer in the same way he had back in Kumogakure, he found the words stuck in his throat. He closed his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them again, he shifted his gaze to Sakura.

He didn't answer Naruto—he couldn't bring himself to say the answer he had before. He knew the reason why. He couldn't say that he didn't love her, when he honestly didn't know the answer to Naruto's question.

A/N: I know Sasuke's Sharingan temporary blindness thing was resolved fairly quickly, but the temporary blindness thing isn't all that huge of an issue, just Sasuke being stupid and trying to force things to work before they're ready to. :B Though I did have epic amounts of fun reading all your reviews. I think that's the biggest reaction I've gotten for a chapter ever. I was laughing so hard for most of them. I could hardly breathe, and my sister was looking at me like I was crazy, and then laughing with me while I read random excerpts. The worst/ironic/funniest part was that I *knew* it was temporary. But no, I wasn't about to make Sasuke permanently blind—even I find that cruel. XD

I really love you guys. You make my day.

Little Piper Girl said the most hilarious thing, what makes it funnier is that it's basically true (in a nutshell-ish sort of way): "So! You send Nariko, Itachi, and Konan out on some cracktastic family picnic. And reblind Sasuke." Cracktastic family picnic, FTW! XD

Chapter 64

A/N: Ah, **Little Piper Girl** , I love your take on things! I can't help but quote you again:

"Our family picnic has turned into a camping trip and now Team Seven is doing their rendition of 'Children of the Corn'... 'Ninjas of the Rice'?"

FTWx2! XD

Note: FAQ on my profile page has been updated (again), for those of you who are still confused about the answers. If you have any questions, please check the FAQ before you ask, as the biggest ones are already answered there.

Chapter Sixty-Four: Encounter

When Team Seven returned to Konoha, Sakura was now faced with the problem of trying to assist Sasuke's Sharingan again, without over-taxing it like last time. She had examined his eyes, and from what she could tell, nothing was damaged. Nothing was injured at all. But as far as his Sharingan went, she couldn't tell if that was damaged unless it was activated.

She knew that he could activate it in dire situations, but to create a dire situation was hard. The dishes had worked until she had to tell Sasuke the truth about what they actually were. Since then she had thought of multiple ways she could tease his Sharingan into revealing itself—that was what she had spent most of her mission duty doing. Long hours of watch duty were spent plotting ways to put Sasuke in a calamitous enough situation. There hadn't been much she had come up with—but she had come up with one idea she figured would work well enough, even if the circumstances didn't

seem to be all that catastrophic. The idea was that he would stand on the spot, while she threw shuriken directly at him—Sasuke possessed enough self-control not to move, she was certain that the Sharingan would be needed to some degree to keep himself from getting injured. The key was to lure it out—if it wasn't permanently damaged already.

Her idea had worked for a bit—Sasuke had been quick in trying to deflect the weapons, and she saw that his eyes were following each one carefully, but it wasn't enough. It wasn't long before he picked up on it, and he could catch one without even blinking. And there hadn't even been a trace of red in his irises. But Sakura was not one to be easily deterred—it was obvious that keeping track of a few shuriken coming from one person was easy enough, but if more than one person were to throw weapons at him, it would force him to draw his attention to more than one opponent. A situation which in a real situation would be impossible to fend off while standing still—the only way to overcome it was if Sasuke used his Sharingan.

It was as a result of this logic that Sasuke could be found on one semi-cloudy day in early March standing rooted to the ground, trying to fend off a melee of weapons. This time he wasn't just avoiding shuriken—to add another level of complexity, Sakura had thought it better to add kunai and throwing needles in as well. Each weapon would require a different kind of reaction—particularly the throwing needles because they were so fine. The assailants that could be found throwing the weapons in question were none other than Sakura, Naruto, and Rock Lee.

"Your speed is very formidable, Sasuke-kun!" Lee declared with admiration, "I shall endeavor to make this task as challenging as possible!"

This enthusiastic promise didn't seem to go over well with Sasuke, as Sakura saw his face look strained for split second before it was masked. He was far enough away that she had only caught it by chance—she couldn't even see his eyes clearly. But even so, Sakura knew that Sasuke was having more trouble than he had with only

her, and even though he would never admit it, having this exercise made more formidable for him was something Sasuke didn't look like he wanted. She was pretty sure that she was the only one who had caught onto this though, as Naruto hadn't made some comment asking of Sasuke was too tired.

"Maybe if we throw our weapons with more strength, he will find it more challenging," Sakura suggested.

Of course, even if Sasuke didn't want more of a challenge, that didn't mean he didn't need one, and she of all people was not going to hold back when it came to the recovery of Sasuke's Sharingan. The look Sasuke gave her upon her words was mixed with incredulity and disbelief. She only laughed as she added chakra to her arms, strengthening the muscles.

"I don't care what we do," Naruto said, grinning broadly, "There aren't may times when I get to throw sharp objects at Sasuke for fun. And this time he won't chase me!"

"We can trade places later, dobe," Sasuke growled, snatching four weapons out of the air at once, two in each hand. He opened his hand to snatch more, letting the first four drop, "Then you can see how fun it is."

In the middle of his speech, Sasuke missed a throwing needle that had been thrown at him. It whizzed by his ear, and Sakura caught how close it had been to actually grazing it. As his trainer, caregiver, and health supervisor, she was quick to reprimand him for this action—after all the threats from her parents of recent days, she wasn't going to cut Sasuke any slack. She had to produce results.

"Hey! No talking!" she reprimanded, "Concentrate!"

Sasuke grumbled, but kept his mouth shut, and she was satisfied. Sasuke was a determined worker—once he set a goal, he would meet it, no matter what. She remembered the first day they started learning martial arts in the Academy—not many of them participated

in any active activities prior to the first day, and as a result, everyone was out of shape and sore from the vigorous exercise. But Sakura remembered that it was Sasuke who grew accustomed the quickest. She knew just from looking at him during classes that he was practicing at home, and after class—some mornings he came in so stiff that he was barely able to walk.

This case was no different, Sasuke wanted his Sharingan even more than she wanted it for him. He wouldn't slack off—that wasn't the issue. The issue was more of whether they both could produce results in time. Sakura found herself in a situation that was not at all to her liking. It was approximately two weeks ago that her parents came over for dinner, and as everything seemed fine and under control, her family was quiet for a time. Kanaye kept his promise in that he wouldn't say anything more if their father was satisfied. And he hadn't—he went back to being good-natured and never raised an eyebrow or made comment. Her father too, was acting decently, he didn't say anything outright, but his disapproval still hung there, like a curtain—but unlike before the curtain wasn't a smothering drapery. Her father was more at ease as well.

What worried Sakura was when her mother—her mother, who had been the first to support her—talked with her when by off chance they had met while grocery shopping. Unlike her father and Kanaye, her mother could be persuasive in the way that mothers were, without having to yell, or speak their mind. The way her mother phrased things, it actually made Sakura feel guilty for over-extending the duration of her stay with Sasuke. And it made her feel even guiltier for sleeping next to him without her parents' knowledge.

It was her mother who made her worry the most now, in a way that she hadn't worried all that much with her other two family members. The others she could promise results, and not feel so badly that things weren't coming along nicely. But when her mother expressed concern in the gentle way that she had, Sakura knew that she had to prove it to her mother to be true—that she could restore Sasuke's

Sharingan, that she could be of more use and that she had to stay with him.

What she was going to do after Sasuke's Sharingan was mostly restored, she didn't know. She would probably return home, Sasuke and her could still spend time together, but it wouldn't be as often—she wouldn't be making dinner every other night, she wouldn't be gardening in his backyard, she wouldn't be lying next to him as she listened to his soft breathing as he slept. She would be back in her old room, in her old house—she couldn't even think of it as home anymore. Her parents would be happy, her brother satisfied. But her...? And Sasuke...?

She hadn't told him that her mother had talked to her. She didn't want to.

Her mind had been processing the whole bit, while Inner Sakura had taken over in throwing the weapon's at Sasuke. So absorbed in her thoughts, it was only when she reached back to throw another kunai that she realized she had used her weapons up. She let her arms fall limply to her sides.

"I'm out," she said, clearing her head. She didn't want Sasuke catching on, and then asking her what was wrong. She would say it's nothing, and he wouldn't believe her.

She waited for a few minutes.

"Me too," Naruto said, double-checking his kunai pouch, a frown on his face, and then he checked his shuriken holster just to be sure.

And finally, a few seconds after Naruto, Lee dropped his hands as well, "It would appear that I, too, am out of weapons."

"Okay," Sakura nodded; turning to Sasuke she addressed him directly, "You, come here."

Sasuke was obviously not enjoying this type of treatment. His very subtle expression showed it, but despite his grumpy mood, he slouched over as asked. Sakura waited patiently—he was standing a good distance away from them—and then she noticed he was rubbing his eyes a little bit. Concern took hold of her and she hurried over to meet him half way.

"What's wrong?" she asked instantly.

"Nothing," Sasuke replied snappishly, "They just feel dry that's all."

"Let's see," Sakura ordered quickly, and reaching out, she took his hands away from his face.

She was expecting to see obsidian, maybe if they were lucky, a little bit of red to make his eyes wine coloured. But that was all she was really expecting, bordering on hoping. But what she was not expecting was to see one bright crimson eye staring back at her, the other one blood red. She froze for a moment, as right before her eyes the blood red eye faded into an identical crimson. There was a tomoe in the eye that had already been crimson.

"What?" Sasuke asked, he still sounded vaguely grouchy.

"Let me see!" Naruto exclaimed, running over, and nudging Sakura over a little.

"I would be interested in seeing the results as well," Lee insisted, and he nudged Sakura on her other side, making it so the three of them were crowded closely in front of Sasuke.

"What?!" Sasuke asked irritably, taking a step back.

"Mirror," Sakura stated suddenly; she whirled about on the spot, running towards her backpack.

Quickly she rummaged through it, and promptly returned with a small round pocket-mirror; she shoved past Lee and Naruto and held it in

front of Sasuke's face triumphantly. Sasuke paused just as he had the first time when he saw the red tinge in his eyes in the bathroom mirror. Taking the mirror from her, he held it closer to his face, examining each eye carefully. He was quiet, but Sakura thought he seemed a little taken aback, if not a little disappointed.

"One tomoe, in one eye," he said quietly.

"It's better than nothing!" Sakura said with exasperation. She had been right, he was disappointed.

"I was hoping I would still be able to have all three in each eye," he mumbled, handing the mirror back to her.

"Sasuke, do you know what happens when you break a limb? When it can't be healed by medical ninjutsu, that is?" Sakura asked impatiently, "It takes months to heal, and afterwards, depending on what you broke, the muscles in that limb haven't been used for a long time. The slightest task causes them pain—they are simply unable to go back to maximum usage. Ask Lee-san, he had to go through that."

"Hai, Sakura-san," Lee agreed readily, "After my injury three years ago from the Preliminary finals in the Chuunin Exam, it was very difficult for me to return to my original condition."

"Exactly, though you didn't help anything by trying to fight that bone guy by yourself. If Gaara hadn't shown up, and if you hadn't been so wasted on *sake*, you would have been feeling it worse," Sakura reprimanded. She couldn't help herself, when she had heard what had happened, she was so shocked that when she became a medic, she would make sure that Lee never did anything of the sort again.

"I am sorry for making you worry, Sakura-san, I will never do it again," Lee said with an apologetic bow.

"Anyways, Sasuke, the point is, that it's the same for your Sharingan. You haven't used it for months. Give it some time, and don't work it

beyond what it's capable of doing at this point in time. Otherwise it could end up like last time, except worse."

"It's not like you to sulk, teme," Naruto commented, with a grin.

"I am not sulking," Sasuke answered sharply.

"You could have fooled me," Sakura snorted, taking the mirror back from him.

"When my Sharingan first awoke on it's own accord, I had two tomoe in one eye and a single one in the other," Sasuke said with mild irritation, "I think it would be a little understandable why I am disappointed that there is even less than that when it has re-manifested now."

Sakura smiled sympathetically, "It only means it'll take longer. And you have the time to wait."

"Mr. Glass-is-Half-Empty wants more tomoe?" Naruto asked, bending down and picking up one of the discarded weapons, "I say we give him what he wants."

All three of them, Sakura, Sasuke, and Lee, looked at Naruto questioningly. And the fox-faced boy grinned at them, a mischievous look was there, Sakura was suddenly suspicious.

"I don't mind at all," Naruto grinned, "As long as I get to help throw things at Sasuke, dattebayo!"

Of the paths that crossed the border, Itachi had chosen probably by far the most difficult. Getting over the border was the easiest part, but the trail afterwards that led to the Land of Fire proved to be difficult terrain. The hills were steep and rocky though they couldn't quite be described as mountains. It was also quite clearly an uninhabited area, because they saw nobody, and there were no inns

or towns to stay at. They went camping every night for almost a week.

By the time they made it out of the terrible terrain, they were well within the Land of Fire, and only three quarters of the distance to get to the Land of Waves remained. But they were exhausted, or at least Nariko and Konan were—if Itachi was too, he didn't show it—and by popular demand, they stayed at an inn in the first small town they came to. They were all disguised, of course, except Nariko, who wasn't wanted anywhere, and nobody knew who she was anyways.

"You look funny, Flower-chan," Nariko said as they left the following morning, walking backwards as she looked at the older woman, "Without blue hair, that is."

"Shh," Flower-chan reminded her, but smiled anyways, "Do I really?"

"It's just...different," Nariko amended, studying Flower-chan.

She looked really different with dark brown hair and green eyes. She had let her hair down too, so that it hung about her shoulders and partially down her back. It gave her an entirely new look. Nariko was convinced she would not have been able to recognize her in a crowd—it was Flower-chan's blue hair that made her stand out to Nariko, it was her distinctive feature.

She turned her gaze to Itachi, who looked even more different from his normal appearance than Flower-chan did. He had changed his appearance so that his hair looked shorter and clean-cut—the colour had been changed so it was the exact same as her own. The two lines below his eyes had been smoothed away, and it made him look a lot younger, she thought. His eyes weren't red either, which was what made his appearance look all the stranger to her. She was used to the bright crimson staring back at her, not eyes coloured caramel that were identical to hers.

"What about him?" Flower-chan asked, "I hardly recognize him."

"Nii-sama looks like another person," Nariko answered in agreement, twirling so that she faced forwards again; she dropped his name, like she had been asked to do for the time being.

"He looks like he's your real brother," Flower-chan added, and then smirked, "A bit like a farm boy, though."

He turned his head towards her, raising a sandy coloured eyebrow, "A farm boy?"

Flower-chan laughed, "I mean, the clothes we're wearing makes us look like some traveling farmers—and you almost look too young for me now. It looks believable that you're her brother, but if I'm supposed to be your wife, shouldn't you look a bit older?"

"You sound like you are calling yourself old," Itachi replied.

"I'm okay with being four years older than you, but now I look like I'm fifteen years older than you," Flower-chan retorted.

"Use your genjutsu to make yourself younger," Itachi shrugged.

"Then I'll look as young as Nariko."

Nariko glanced over her shoulder at the two of them, and she saw Itachi smile slightly. But when he thought nobody was looking, she saw a hint of the lines return to his face.

Nariko hadn't really understood why they had changed their appearances. Though she assumed it had something to do with what Konan had told her about some people not liking them, and not wanting them around. There were some people that must really hate them, if they had to change even the way they looked. Even she had to wear something different, and Itachi had told her it would be best if she didn't wear her Akatsuki cloak even if nobody had anything against her. They might not like her just because she was connected with Akatsuki, he told her. But they hadn't needed to change the way

she looked with what Flower-chan had called 'genjutsu', because others didn't know her.

They continued to walk. Nariko didn't know how far they were going, but she figured that the farther away from Amegakure they were, the better. It would be easier to break away from Amegakure if they were far from the Leader. But Nariko wasn't sure when to raise the suggestion of never going back. She wasn't sure if she should say it along the way, or if she should say something when they finally reached their final destination.

"How long are we going to stay at the Land of—the Country of..." she started, but she forgot the name.

"Waves?" Flower-chan offered.

"Yeah."

"As long as it takes for us to find the demon," Flower-chan answered, "We'll have to ask around first, and find signs of it. Then your brother and I will have to subdue it."

"Oh, okay," Nariko mumbled, "A while then..."

"Probably."

Nariko chewed on this information for a bit. Maybe it would be best if she waited. They were closer to Amegakure than they were to the Land of Waves—or so she'd been told. They might turn around and go back if they didn't like the idea. But if she brought it up suddenly, they might not like it either. Maybe if she hinted to them somehow, made them think about the idea, maybe eventually they'd consider it—and maybe then, if she suggested it, they would agree.

"Ne, Flower-chan, Ita—er, Niisama, why do you two live in Amegakure?" she asked casually.

"You live there, too, Kit," Flower-chan responded.

"Yeah, I know, but you both lived there for a while before you rescued me, right?" she clarified, and when she received no immediate answer, she continued, "I don't see why you do. I think you both don't like it."

"That is where the Leader wishes us to stay," Itachi answered, "He can keep out those who he does not want to let in. Amegakure is protected by him, thus it makes it a practical place of residence."

"Yeah, but if people are trying to get in that you don't want in, shouldn't you just leave instead?" Nariko asked, picking her words carefully, "Haven't you ever thought of leaving Amegakure and Leader-sama?"

There was a pause, and Nariko hoped she hadn't said the wrong things. Hesitantly she looked over her shoulder at the two of them, trying to read their blank faces.

"Yes," was the quiet and simultaneous answer from them both. Nariko saw them exchange looks, and there was a distinct look of surprise on both of their faces. It seemed that neither of them had expected the other to answer the answer they did. But what Nariko was surprised about was that they both had considered leaving, yet hadn't acted on it. She couldn't fathom why neither of them had pursued the idea further—they hated living under the Leader, she was sure of this.

"Why don't you just leave, then?" she asked.

"It's not as simple as it sounds, Kit," Flower-chan answered heavily, "It's complicated."

The tone was one that hinted that if Nariko asked more questions on the matter, people would be displeased with her. So she just shut her mouth for the time being, but she never stopped planning or hoping. It was complicated, Flower-chan said, but things always were. But Nariko wasn't going to let that stop her, not if she could help it.

They all deserved a better life, and she was going to fight to get it. The extent of the truth of that statement, Nariko had no idea.

Roughly a week passed.

And then another.

It was the eleventh of March—nine days since they had entered the Land of Fire. The trek had been long, and they still had a ways to go, but the three of them would eventually reach the Land of Waves. And inevitably, every day that passed, they would be getting closer to Konoha. As it was, they were only a few miles outside of it, the road that they were taking wasn't the closest road to the village, but it was the second nearest, and also the fastest way to the Wave Country. But it wouldn't be until they were actually past the shinobi village that Itachi would feel at ease again.

"Oi, hubbie," Konan called over to him—his newly acquired nickname came with the alias of being Konan's husband, "You've been a bit on edge these past few days. You okay?"

Even Konan had noticed, that was how much he was letting it get to him. Nariko on the other hand, had not, but that was not entirely surprising. He usually kept his emotions concealed as best he could, but the closer they got to Konoha, the chances of running into Leaf Shinobi increased substantially—it was not that he was worried about conflict, for they could easily handle themselves, but he was worried about being discovered, that word would get out. The prospect of Konoha knowing that one of their biggest traitors was near, bothered him.

There was always an itch somewhere in him when he got near Konoha, an emotional itch that scratched at him from the inside, trying to break loose. He didn't need that itch to be there, it technically shouldn't even exist, but it somehow did. He felt like there was something constricting his mind, like at times his mind was

being suppressed by some external force, but he never let it bother him, because it helped suppress the itch too.

"Konoha is not a place I like to be near," Itachi answered slowly, in response to Konan's question, "But I will be fine."

She didn't answer right away, but stared off into space for a moment, "I know what you mean. I don't like going to the Land of Lightning either, for the same reasons."

He looked at her, his eyes lingering a moment. She said she understood him, a thing he had been told before by many different people. But this was the first time when he heard those words that he actually believed them. Konan was a unique woman with a strong personality, had always recognized that, but aside from that, he barely knew her—yet somehow he knew that she could understand him in this situation. Now that his attention was on her, he contemplated for the first time, the very idea of Konan.

Before this, they had never worked together long term, never going on missions together. The longest he had probably spent in her company was an evening's worth. They had known each other for many years, granted, but they had never gotten to know one another—that was part of how it worked between her and him, they never talked. The first time he had spent a night in her company, she told him specifically:

Now is not the time for talking. Talking is for after, when the words actually mean something.

Their time together, as far as anyone—even the both of them—were concerned, simply didn't exist. Anything done was forgotten, discarded, in the daytime hours, it was like it had never happened. It was the same for words, so they never spoke. And it was because of this that even though they had known *of* one another for years, they didn't actually *know* each other.

But that was changing, he realized. Of all they years they had both been in Akatsuki, only one thing had happened to make things slowly change in on direction. Itachi's eyes shifted from Konan to the figure of the petite teenaged girl who was skipping merrily ahead of the two of them. The young woman who acted little more than a girl had changed things. The changes were subtle, but still there all the same. Nariko's presence had forced them to interact with one another during the day, and actually speak to one another. There was evidence enough of this.

Just now, Konan had commented on his slight restlessness as they drew near to Konoha. In the past she wouldn't have commented, and even if she had, it would only to leave a subtle hint that he had better not let his agitation interfere with the mission. And he never would have responded to the comment, letting her know why he was agitated, and she too would never answer with her own personal comment.

And as for their relations with Nariko, he knew that she suspected him of caring about her, while he suspected the same of her. Yet, if they both thought that the other was acting out of duty by becoming attached to the girl who had brought them closer, why had neither of them made the accusation? Why had neither reported it to Pain duly and sealed the Rokubi away before the attachment could become a mess? Neither of them had suggested Pain to watch her even though they probably had both thought up they idea. He knew they trusted each other, whereas before, they hadn't trusted each other at all. If the nights were not forgotten, even he would not trust her with that secret.

It started to rain. Slowly at first, a few scattered drops landing on the path and then on the leaves of the trees. But then it slowly faded to torrents of pebble-sized raindrops, starting to soak the three of them as they walked.

"Well, damn," Itachi heard Konan mutter to herself.

Nariko must have heard too, because she turned her head to Konan and spun a happy circle, "At least the rain here is better than in Amegakure, ne?"

It was. Itachi could feel it, and he knew Konan would be able to as well. The rain here was untainted, free of Pain's presence. The slight lacing of chakra inside the water drops wasn't there, and it made the rain feel purer, cleaner.

They continued to walk, despite the rain—they couldn't let the turn in the weather slow their journey. As they walked, Itachi shifted his thoughts away from Nariko entirely, and back to Konan. It was clear to him that they trusted each other more, understood each other better. He had always felt drawn to her rather than any other woman, and he hadn't known why, but now he understood that it was like Konan had said. She understood. They understood their predicaments like none other in Akatsuki could.

The other members were there either because they wanted to be, or they were recruited for their abilities. In essence, none of them were supposed to leave, but there was nothing stopping them. Any one member could pack their bags and leave if they were daring enough. But for Itachi, he knew he couldn't do that, he was under the constant watch of Uchiha Madara, even though he did not wish to remain with Akatsuki. As for Konan, for whatever reason, he did not know why, but she was restricted by Pain to stay with Akatsuki. Whether he had something against her, or she felt obligated for some reason to stand by his organization, it was clear that she was with Akatsuki for no other reason. She, like him, was trapped there too. They understood each other, they became tied to one another for that reason, and now, for some reason, Itachi knew he could not easily break away like he would have once been able to.

But even though they talked now, understood each other better—fundamentally, what had changed? Nothing. Yet at the same time, everything had changed. Konan still stood in the same place where she always had in his mind, but the lighting was now different, making her become something entirely different to him.

The compressing feeling weighed heavily in his mind as he struggled to place her. Like Nariko, he felt an attachment, though he wasn't consciously aware of it. Attachment was frowned upon, shameful, forbidden, and he was trapped in that mindset.

It was at that point that Konan caught him staring at her. "Fantasizing?" she teased.

He only looked blankly at her in response. He was used to her comments.

"Try not to get too carried away," she added with a mischievous look on her face, before she looked forwards again, her form blurred by the torrents of silver droplets.

The rain let up by evening, and after consulting his map, Itachi designated a spot to camp a two kilometers outside of a town. This town was the next biggest town near Konoha, and also the most dangerous for them to enter. The plan was to avoid it entirely tomorrow by going around, cutting through a farmer's field. But for the time being, they needed to camp, and additionally, they needed more supplies.

"So, let me get this straight," Konan said ponderously, "We need more supplies, but we can't go into town, or else we'll be most likely found, disguised or not. So, what are we supposed to do about supplies?"

"We could ration what we have left, and then wait for the next town," Itachi answered her.

"Yeah, which is three days away or something," Konan argued back, "I'm not going to eat rationed food when we're just 2 k outside a town."

"I am open to suggestions," Itachi said calmly, though he was a little irritated with her. No doubt, she had rationed before, as had he, the

only person who would be unaccustomed to rationing would be Nariko.

Konan looked thoughtful, and determined. Itachi was certain she was not going to let them leave before they had re-supplied. They didn't need much, just a few days worth of food, and they could stop in another town. That was why Itachi didn't see why they couldn't wait, they didn't need that much to start with.

"We could send Nariko," Konan said slowly, eyeing the girl carefully.

Itachi stared at her like she was crazy. Itachi wasn't certain that Nariko was hurting herself on purpose, nor did he know whether or not she was aware of what would happen to her, but his suspicions were still very strong, and sending Nariko into town was like practically giving her a way to escape. It would be very difficult finding her, and detaining her again if she did try to run, not to mention it would cause a commotion that would definitely draw attention to them if not Leaf Shinobi themselves.

"Is that wise?" he asked calmly, trying to subtly give Konan a pointed look.

"Two kilometers, that is a twenty minute walk," Konan replied, "What could possibly happen?"

"She could become...lost," Itachi said slowly.

Nariko, who seemed rather excited at the prospect, shook her head vigorously, "Nuh-uh, Niisama. I won't get lost. If I can't get lost in the buildings of Amegakure, I won't get lost here."

"There could be Leaf Shinobi in the town," Itachi reminded Konan. Wasn't it she herself who said, when they decided to bring Nariko, that they couldn't misplace her?

"Don't worry, of course I've got a method of keeping an eye on her, just in case she...gets in trouble," Konan said, using a select phrase.

Itachi knew that she meant in case she tried to run away, "I wouldn't send her into enemy territory without having some way of keeping track of her."

"Really?" Nariko seemed fascinated, and not at all concerned.

"Mmmhmm," Konan said, putting a hand on the girl's head and ruffling her hair playfully, "You know my paper rose? We'll put something like that on you, and I'll be able to tell roughly where you are. So if you run into trouble, we can come help, okay?"

"Will I be getting into trouble?" Nariko asked, sounding a little nervous. Of course she had been assured that nobody would be after her, this just seemed to contradict that assurance.

"Not likely," Konan answered, and then it was her turn to give Itachi a pointed look, "Unless you get lost and go the wrong way."

"I won't, I promise. I'll come right back when I'm done," Nariko promised, seemingly earnest. The delight of being sent out on her own was probably from the joy of being given a task that she was responsible for. Her childlike personality was the source of this wanting to be useful. Itachi was still reluctant, but it seemed that Konan was certain about her way of tracking Nariko, and Nariko seemed fixed on the idea.

"Good enough for you, hubbie?" Konan asked, looking a little smug.

He sighed ever so slightly, "All right."

"It's settled then," Konan declared proudly, "You know how money works, right?"

"Yeah, a little. The numbers on the paper have to be greater than the ones on the item you want to buy, right?" Nariko asked.

"Right," Konan nodded, "Your 'brother' will give you some money, and I'll make you a paper flower to stick in your hair or something to

make sure you don't get lost or hurt."

Itachi dug through their belongings for a few bills in which to pay for the supplies, while Konan pulled out some paper and started folding an accessory for Nariko. Folding the paper daisy took less time than actually fixing it in Nariko's hair, so Itachi scrawled a short list for Nariko, making sure his printing was legible. When Konan was finished, Nariko's hair was tucked up on one side with the small daisy, making her look even more like a small child. He gave a small smile and handed her the list.

"Just follow this road for about twenty minutes, and you will come to town. Ask someone the nearest way to market," Itachi said while handing her the list, "And then make your way back here as quickly as possible."

"Of course, Nii-sama," Nariko quipped.

She pocketed the list, and then skipped merrily down the path. When she was no longer visible to Konan or Itachi, he turned to his partner with a serious look.

"You had best be knowing what you are doing," he told her softly, doubts still planted deeply in his mind.

Shopping was fun, Nariko concluded. There were many different things you could buy with money, and it was kind of fun to own things. The amount of money Itachi had given her was more than enough for what had been on the list. Or at least so far it had been. She had found the market quickly after shyly asking some directions of a man who was guarding the gate of the town. He asked her where she was from, and remembering that Flower-chan had said they looked like farmers, she said that she was from a farm to the west, not knowing which direction west was. When he had asked her if she was by herself, she had said yes, and that she was going to meet her brother and her brother's wife later that day. The exchange

had started to make her nervous, so she quickly thanked the man for directing her to the market, before he could ask any more questions.

The market was very busy, and Nariko hadn't seen anything like it before in her life. There were so many shops that sold so many different things that she couldn't seem to take everything in as much as she would have liked. She quickly read as many of the signs as she could and headed off in the direction of various stands that looked like they might have the things on her list.

She bought some dried fruit, some salted fish and salted pork, and she also bought some bread. There were a few other odd foods on the list, which she bought, until there were only a couple things left on the list. She ran around market some more, as the sun started to set, giving everything a red light in the market. Some string lights came on, and she was so utterly fascinated by them that she took the time to just stand and stare at them for a while. She loved market, she decided, and she wanted to take in as much as she could. She looked at the lights, and listened to the conversations around her. Most of it was just snatches as people passed her, but it was enough to make her happy.

"...The price of seafood is going up, this is what comes of moving inland..."

"...the grocer moved his stand again! I wonder where he is this time..."

"...the children have run off again, they better be home before..."

Nariko was content to listen. So many different people, all living their own lives. She wondered what it would be like if she could live a day in someone else's life each day. There were people who didn't know her; there were people she didn't know. People would pass her and never know she had a demon in her, and she would pass people not knowing about them. It was a funny sort of thing.

"...don't see why...complaining, two tomoe...each eye is great progress for...time you've put...training..."

"It's still not...enough. This mission....could be back...training in..."

"Come on, teme...-chan's right. ...complaining over nothing."

"It's not nothing. It's very important, dobe. I'm an...The...is a trademark of my clan. Anything less than three tomoe is unacceptable."

Nariko frowned a little at the small snatches of conversation she was hearing now. It was definitely not the same type of conversation the others were having in town. And a mission...Flower-chan and Itachi said they were on a mission. And Flower-chan and Itachi were ninja. So, that must mean she was hearing other ninja talking. And their conversation was getting clearer. They were getting closer.

"Anyways, Sasuke, we'll be working on it right away when we get home again." It was the voice of a girl, "This is the last day of the mission anyways."

Nariko froze. Itachi's brother's name was Sasuke. Were there other people who had the same name as that? She didn't know.

"Sounds like a plan to me, I for one would like to throw—"

That was all Nariko heard before the guy that they called Sasuke shouted, "Dobe, watch out!"

And then someone collided with Nariko from behind. She stumbled and then found her footing before she tripped, managing not to drop any of the groceries. Whirling around, she faced the people she had been hearing, and bowed deeply.

"I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to be in your way, I shouldn't have been daydreaming!" she spilled out speaking rather quickly and apologetically.

"Anosa, that's okay..." the boy who crashed into her said, sounding a little guilty, "As long as you aren't hurt, neechan."

Nariko straightened up, a little surprised—she had never been called neechan before. The boy was scratching the back of his head, his eyes squinted shut in a guilty grin. His hair was blond like Deidara's, she noticed, and he had strange marks on his cheeks, but it was when he opened his eyes that she was blown away. It wasn't so much the colour that caused her to go into slight shock, but what she saw there. It was like it had been with the Shichibi's host, the look in those eyes—they were bright blue, but they had something deep inside them that told her that this boy was just like her. He was a Jinchuuriki.

"She's fine, dobe," the other boy said after a pause of silence, "We're in a hurry, let's go."

"Right, okay," the Jinchuuriki boy said, "Take care of yourself, neechan."

And the three of them walked past her. She watched them as she went, watching their backs as they retreated. Already the Jinchuuriki was talking again with his comrades, with the girl specifically, one who had pink hair. However, the last member of their party looked over his shoulder at her for a few seconds longer. His dark eyes looked over at her, and his dark hair looked steely in the red glow of the sunset. When he looked forwards again, Nariko breathed a sigh of relief, but there was no doubt in her mind now, that that young man was in fact Itachi's brother.

A shiver ran down her spine and she quickly glanced down at her shopping list. There was only one item left, and she wanted to rejoin Flower-chan and Itachi before it got dark. But one thing she made clear to herself. She was *not* going to tell them about the Jinchuuriki she met by accident, and she was *not* going to tell Itachi about his brother.

Sasuke was glad that the mission they had just recently come home from was over. It had been rather pointless, involving helping deliver some messages in one town near Konoha, but that was not why he was glad it was over. He was happy to leave the town, especially after what happened on the last day. The incident of crashing into a young girl in the town had caused to him to act ponderous for the rest of that afternoon, and Naruto had bugged him incessantly, demanding what was on his mind. Of course, Sasuke, being tactful, did not tell Naruto at all.

He did not tell Naruto that the girl they had crashed into was likely a Jinchuuriki.

Like Yugito, her chakra signature was amazingly powerful, even more so than Yugito's Nekomata's chakra had been. The girl did not appear to be shinobi either, because she was dressed like a poor farmer's daughter, and the only notable feature was a small daisy pinned in her hair, which looked like it was made of paper or something similar. The only way she could have that much chakra was if she had a demon, though there was no evidence to support it, it was still probable.

The reason he had not told Naruto was simply because his best friend would probably want to hunt her down and talk with her or something. It seemed that she functioned well enough in society, so Sasuke found it unnecessary to do anything of the sort. He kept the matter to himself.

At the moment he was walking home from the bank, having deposited the check he had been given for the mission, and he decided he had dwelt quite enough on the chakra signature of the girl in the town. He pushed it from his mind, and instead, he thought instead of what Sakura would be cooking for dinner that evening. They had been eating out while on the mission, and he longed for her home cooking.

"Oi! Sasuke!" came an obnoxious shout. Sasuke rolled his eyes, turning just in time to see Naruto skidding to a stop beside him.

"What do you want, dobe?" Sasuke asked impatiently, "If it's to bother me about what was supposedly 'bothering' me yesterday, I told you already, nothing was—"

"Don't be presumptuous, teme," Naruto retorted.

"That is possibly the biggest word I have ever heard from your mouth," Sasuke stated.

"Shut up, teme," Naruto shot back again, "Will you be quiet for a minute so I can actually talk to you?"

"Okay, fine, what do you want?" Sasuke asked again, this time crossing his arms.

"Since you probably forgot, or didn't know to start, Sakura-chan's birthday is on the twenty-eighth," Naruto said, crossing his arms, "Hinata-chan and I are planning a surprise birthday party for her, and we'll be busy preparing."

No, he hadn't known. Sakura hadn't mentioned anything about it either. He hadn't known about Naruto's birthday's either. He figured he should probably go and look up Kakashi's birthday just so that he could at least say he didn't forget it. But right now, Sakura's birthday was probably closer, and he should focus on that instead. First of all, he didn't know what to get her.

"What do you want me to do to help?" Sasuke asked then.

"Nothing," Naruto answered, "Well, actually, if you could come up with an excuse for when I'm not around, that'd be great."

"You don't want my help?" Sasuke asked, confused. If anything, he felt obligated to help out with preparations for Sakura's birthday.

"No, because you're the one who spends the most time with her," Naruto replied, "So if you suddenly started disappearing too, and

didn't want to work on your Sharingan, she'd figure something was up."

' *Or get worried,*' Sasuke added in his mind, remembering how when he was out late visiting his parents graves, that she thought he had left the village. He still wasn't sure what had brought on that assumption, but he knew that the fear of him leaving was still very active in her mind.

"I just thought I'd let you know, because I figured you didn't know," Naruto said in a concluding sort of way, "I don't think she wants to people to make a fuss, but she's turning eighteen, so Hinata-chan and I thought we would do something anyways. Just be sure that you have a gift or something."

Sasuke nodded, "Okay. ...Thanks, dobe."

"No problem, teme," Naruto grinned, "The party's going to be at Ichiraku Ramen's starting at six o'clock on her birthday. Find some reason to bring her there, okay?"

Sasuke nodded, and then Naruto took off again, leaving Sasuke to wonder what on earth he was going to get Sakura for her eighteenth birthday. The rest of the walk home he thought about it, his mind drawing up blanks, and whenever he thought of something, he quickly discarded it. He didn't want to get her something that most girls would enjoy receiving from a guy, like jewelry or stuffed animals. And he couldn't really get her something practical, like a new set of kunai's or something. It would make an ideal gift for himself, but he wanted to give Sakura something with a little more finesse.

However, when he arrived home, he was forced to put the matter aside for the time being, because when he came home, someone was just leaving as he was arriving. And that person was Sakura's mother.

Sakura was sitting at the kitchen table, her hand folded in front of her as she stared glumly at the table's surface. She hadn't bothered to see her mother to the door, and she hadn't gotten started on dinner like she had planned. Instead, her mind was focused on what her mother had come to see her about—about her staying at the Uchiha household. Her mother had come and made another plea with her for her to come home, telling her that this had gone on long enough, and when her daughter had not budged, she promised she would visit every three days until her daughter saw sense. Sakura knew that this was only because she would be turning eighteen in a couple weeks, and she would then be a legal adult and technically didn't have to move out of Sasuke's house if she didn't want to. She would never pull that as an excuse on her parents though. Legal adult or not, it would be a low blow to take this to the jurisdictional level.

Still, her mother's most recent visit had disconcerted her more than any other threat so far. Sakura saw sense in her mother's words—no, she wasn't needed here anymore; no, Sasuke had no use for her anymore; yes, she was probably over-staying her welcome. Not only was she beginning to doubt her own purpose in the house, but her mother had also brought along a letter for her, addressed to her from the Hokage herself.

Sakura, it read,

It has been recently been brought to my attention about the current situation that has developed between you and your family concerning your stay at the Uchiha household. After a discussion with your parents, their concerns with your prolonged stay with Sasuke have been made very clear to me, and if I had been aware of them earlier, I would have called your mission complete long ago. I was under the impression that your stay was approved by your parents because in your reports you continued to request more time to examine the state of Sasuke's vision and the progress of his Sharingan.

However, in lieu of the current situation, I am quite concerned about your present family situation. I did not send you there to break up

your family. I was not aware that your stay would be so long, but now that this has come up, I find that it is my duty as Hokage and your teacher to conclude your mission. Of course you will be paid for all the time that has been spent in Uchiha Sasuke's presence, assisting him. But you are no longer to remain there on the pretense of being on an assignment from me. This matter is now that of your family's, though as your concerned teacher, I strongly suggested that your return home. It would be the best for all of you.

Fifth Hokage of Konohagakure, the Village Hidden in the Leaves,
Tsunade

Sakura had read the letter over twice, and her heart had sunk. Her parents had gotten the Hokage involved now, and her reasons for staying were no longer valid. She didn't know what to do.

"I saw your mother on the way in," came a voice from the entrance to the kitchen. She didn't need to look up in order to see who it was, "She said I should talk to you. What's wrong?"

She smiled wryly to herself. Sasuke always asked what was wrong, and so far, she couldn't remember a time when something *hadn't* been wrong when he asked. Sighing, she indicated that he should sit down, and when he did, she handed the letter from Tsunade to him. She waited patiently while he read it over—he must have read it over at least three times because it was a while before he put it down, and when he did, he was looking incredulously at her.

"Now your mother, too?" Sasuke asked, sounding stunned, "And the Hokage?"

"Are you all that surprised?" Sakura asked, looking at him. Reasons for staying forever? Yeah, right. It was quite clear her time here was running out, "I mean, it was only a matter of time before it happened anyways."

"I don't want you to leave," he stated coldly; his anger wasn't directed at her, she knew, but she felt the iciness anyways, "I don't care what your father, your mother, or even the Hokage says. The Feudal Lord could even visit personally for all I care. I want you to stay."

She looked at him then, the ferociousness behind his words stirring her attention. She agreed with him, every last word, but this time... this time the only thing she was uncertain of was why.

"Why, Sasuke?" she countered impulsively, almost exasperatedly, "Tell me why you want me to stay."

"I don't have to explain myself to you," he replied—she saw his guard snap up, his shell clap shut. He turned away.

"Yes, you do, Sasuke," Sakura said straightening up, the exasperation no longer impulsive, "You have to explain to me, because I've learned that I can't assume anything from you."

There was a moment's pause. She waited, but the answer wasn't to her question.

"Do you want to leave?"

"Don't change the—"

"Do you want to leave?" he asked again, a little more angrily, "If you want to go, then I won't keep you, but if you want to stay then stay."

"It isn't that simple—"

"Yes, Sakura, it is that simple," he answered bluntly.

"This isn't about what I want," she replied firmly, "It is *you* who decides whether I go or stay."

"I'm making my choice depending on your opinion," he replied stoutly, not budging an inch.

Arguing with Sasuke was like arguing with a brick wall. It wouldn't listen and it wouldn't tumble. When the argument mattered, at least. She closed her eyes for a moment, and when she opened them, she looked at him wearily.

"You can see again, and with the rate at which your Sharingan is returning, combined with your discovery of your chakra senses, you'll probably surpass your former strength. And then you'll be one of the best shinobi in this village. I'm not needed anymore," Sakura said quietly, "I want to stay, but I've run out of reasons to tell others for doing so."

"You want to stay," he confirmed resolutely, "Then you'll stay."

He got up and left the room without another word, and after a few seconds she heard the back door close. She stayed rooted to her seat for a moment longer, her mind absorbing the information that had just come to her. Wherever Sasuke was going, she didn't know, and she wasn't sure she wanted to know, but she knew he'd be back later. He wasn't mad at *her* —that much was certain. But it wasn't until a few hours later, when she was getting ready for bed that she realized that he still hadn't told her why he wanted her to stay.

A/N: Hmm, Sasuke seems to be falling more deeply in love with Sakura, though he still can't figure it out. I'm sure a lot of you are convinced a strong blow to the head will bring him to his senses, but I assure you, he'll realize on his own—and very, very soon too. Anyways, see you next chapter!

Chapter 65

A/N: It is only thanks to the hard dedication of the Leaf Ninja website that I was able to write this chapter. Their maps are superb! (gives a basket of virtual cookies to the Leaf Ninja admin)

Chapter Sixty-Five: Uh-oh

When Itachi, Nariko, and Konan arrived at the Land of Waves, it was late at night on the nineteenth of March. It wasn't raining, but it was still cold due to the dampness of the nearby ocean. Nariko had asked about the ocean, but they couldn't see it in the dark, so Nariko hadn't even realized that the bridge they were walking on spanned the sea.

The day before they reached the bridge, they had shed their disguises, no longer as concerned about running into Leaf Shinobi, and since traffic between the Fire Country and the Wave Country was almost constant and steady, they simply crossed over the bridge like everyone else, no passports or papers needed.

The inn they checked into was one that was on the west side of the island that was just north of that where the bridge connected. It was on the edge of town, and not a long walk from the ocean—both Konan and Itachi had selected this inn because it would make accessing the beach easier. And because of its remote location, they were unlikely to draw attention. It was a moderate inn, not particularly fancy, but clean, and had rooms available. And like before, they booked two rooms, Itachi having his own room, and Konan and Nariko sharing.

The first thing Nariko did when Konan opened the door to their room was to wander sleepily across the room and flop facedown onto her bed. Traveling late into the night was obviously harder on her than

any other daytime treks—the small girl did look exhausted. Konan on the other hand was not tired in the least, for some reason, despite a whole days' traveling, she was wide awake and knew that even if she tried to sleep, it would be a while before she would be able to manage it.

"Come on, Kit, don't fall asleep just yet, you've got to brush your teeth," Konan said with a gentle voice, walking over and shaking the small girl gently.

"But I'm so tired," came the muffled response, making the words sound like they were all slurred into one.

"Just two more minutes, that's all," Konan said a little more firmly, "Come on, Kit."

"Fine," Nariko mumbled, slowly hauling herself to her feet and moving towards the bathroom.

Konan unpacked her things while she waited for Nariko, putting things away in an organized fashion—they would be here for a while. The Sanbi had been eluding Pain for half a year now, and it was only with an accidental sighting that they even knew to come to the Land of Waves to begin with. A stray bit of information had led them there, and who knew if it still held true a month later, but they had to look anyways. The Sanbi very well could have moved on, but Konan doubted it. The Land of Waves was a tightly knit group of islands, making the waters between ideal for shelter. The demon, while intelligent, was still—in a sense—an animal that needed a safe place to live like any other creature.

"Ne, Flower-chan?" Nariko mumbled sleepily as she walked out of the bathroom, "This is our final destination, right?"

Konan looked at her and nodded, "We'll be here for a while yet, Kit, so you might as well make yourself comfortable."

"I will," Nariko promised in earnest, and as if to prove her point, she walked across the room and snuggled between the covers of her bed.

Konan couldn't help but smile; she leaned against the table that sat in the corner of the room, and watched the girl contemplatively. Traveling with Nariko had been a different experience. It was somewhat like traveling with a child, and she often felt obligated to look out for her. In a way, Konan was almost like her older sister; she'd never had to act like an older sibling before. Not that she had had a good example set for her. In any case, she felt too old to be Nariko's sister—she was probably ten or twelve years older than her. But if not a sister, then what? A mother?

Konan gave a wry smile at the idea while silently laughing over the notion. Her? A mother? The idea was just as laughable as asking Kakuzu to donate money to a humanitarian organization. It just couldn't happen. Besides, Konan thought soberly, watching Nariko, she was too irresponsible for being a mother. Not to mention her line of work wasn't the best setting to be raising a child in—part-time kunoichi, part-time information gatherer, part-time Angel of God, and part-time mother? Konan knew she couldn't give up her life as a kunoichi. And even if she had wanted to, Pain wouldn't let her.

Konan straightened up and walked over to where Nariko was, and carefully tucked the girl's blankets around her—Nariko was already fast asleep. She didn't want to be a mother, Konan never had, but she could still be a sister to Nariko. At least for the little remaining time the girl had left.

Making sure Nariko was still asleep, Konan crept back across the room, and went to the door. Casting one final glance over her shoulder, she shut the lights off and tiptoed out the door and into the hallway. She was still feeling wide-awake, despite the fact that it was almost close to midnight. There were a few things she could think of to pass the time, and one was to go and bother the stoic Uchiha who was staying down the hall.

Standing outside his door, she rapped lightly on the wooden surface, and she crossed her arms casually while waiting for a response. She saw the door open slowly, the motion so silent that if she had not been paying attention, she wouldn't have noticed at all. It only opened a crack, and from within the darkness behind the door, she could see Itachi's red Sharingan eyes staring out at her.

"Hi," she said evenly, "If you're not too tired, I thought I'd spend the night."

There was a pause from Itachi, and then wordlessly and silently he opened the door wider to let her in. He was predictable that way; she had known he wouldn't turn her away—he never denied her anything. But then again, no man ever had.

Darkness engulfed the room once more as Itachi shut the door, blocking the light spilling in from the hallway. It was silent, and the only sound that broke it was the shutting of the lock. The room was sealed now—anything that happened after this didn't exist beyond the walls of the room. And it was only because she felt assured that all actions and words meant nothing that she didn't worry if they cared for each other at all.

"Hey," Konan's voice penetrated the silence, the near darkness of the room blanketing the two of them. The only light was from the moon as it spilled through the small window. Outside and in the distance, the gentle sounds of the waves of the ocean could be heard crashing on the beach.

In the pale light, she saw Itachi turn his head towards her. His face was blank, but she thought, if she squinted, she could see a little light of questioning behind his eyes. She didn't want to look into his eyes though, she knew they weren't supposed to talk—she was breaking her own rule. She put her head on his bare shoulder instead, draping one of her arms across his chest, pulling herself close to him.

"I know we're not supposed to talk," she said slowly, "But since the words are meaningless, I figure I can say some things that I wouldn't say outside this room."

There was a pause, and she held her breath slightly. She wasn't sure what Itachi's reaction would be, but she decided to continue anyways. Moistening her lips a little, she prepared herself to start talking, but much to her surprise, Itachi said something too.

"What did you want to talk about?" he asked, his voice sounding like the velvety night itself.

She closed her eyes in quiet relief.

"I don't know. Nariko mostly, I guess. Before I came to you tonight, she was so tired, you know? I even had to remind her to brush her teeth," Konan smiled a little to herself, "It's kind of funny, in a sad sort of way, how innocent she is."

"...Aa." The intonation suggested agreement.

"I guess the only reason I'm really dwelling on it now is because... well..." Konan struggled to find the words, "In a way, Nariko is like how all of us should have been, when we grew up. It's her innocence that still lets her see good in this world...which is ironic, because she's the one who's going to die by the hand of the very people who she loves."

Itachi was silent. Konan knew that her words could be implied being biased, and maybe she was a little. Maybe Itachi was right in accusing her months ago, that she had grown attached to Nariko. But could she be blamed? With the amount of time she and Itachi had both spent with the girl, it was getting difficult not to be. There was a fine line between acting the part and being the part. Konan realized that somehow, at some point in time, she had crossed over. And she knew that the same had happened for Itachi.

"And then there's us," she continued somberly, "who grew up as survivors of the Great Shinobi Wars... Even those who were born after the war, they are exposed to the horrors of the world while training and on missions. We're teaching *children* to kill—and Nariko, acting no older than someone who's ten or twelve, is so peaceful, I can never imagine her even *harming* anyone. But kids her age, hell, they're already killing people."

"I was almost thirteen, when..." Itachi trailed off. Konan felt her heart hitch; she hadn't been expecting Itachi to say anything, especially about the Uchiha massacre. He never bragged about it—that was something Hidan would do—but he never expressed any remorse over it. Konan had secretly suspected he regretted what he did, but she had no evidence; it had only been a theory.

"And to think that when I was Nariko's age I was already sleeping with guys for information," Konan added, sparing Itachi the need to finish his sentence, she had a feeling that he didn't want to talk about it much, "I'd lost my parents to the war, and slowly lost everyone I cared about after that. If that doesn't strip you of innocence, then killing others would. I, too, had already killed by the time I was her age. I stopped caring—it hurt less."

Itachi was staring at her now—she could feel it. She'd said too much. But on the other hand, it meant nothing, all of it was nothing more than empty words. He could keep the information, for all she cared, she wouldn't forget that he mentioned the Uchiha massacre, but outside the room, they had nobody to tell. Now was the safest time to talk, if ever.

"It hurts less," Itachi agreed into the dark, "But remains longer..."

There was silence for a time.

"Remember what she asked us a while back? About thinking about leaving Amegakure?" Konan asked, staring out the window and at the silvery moon, its pale face half hidden in darkness, "I was surprised when you said that you wanted to."

"I was surprised by your response as well," Itachi answered; fair enough, Konan thought to herself, "You were co-founder of Akatsuki, were you not?"

"That was a long time ago, a very long time ago," Konan murmured, "Things were different then, and I...I left at one point, that's when I was in Kumo...but Pain found me again, and convinced me to come back. ...Funny, I can't remember why I agreed."

Nagato... She closed her eyes. She hadn't thought about her childhood in a long time, not if she could help it. Though part of her was reminded every time she saw Nagato with Yahiko's face. The idea of that still angered her, infuriated her. Yahiko had been the first victim of Pain's cause. He hadn't had a choice. And she hadn't been there to stop it.

"I hate Pain," she murmured quietly, she could feel the hatred in her voice, "That's why I want to leave. To be away from him forever. But he would find me, if I managed to escape. I know he'd go as far as kill me to try and stop me from leaving. Co-founder or not, it wouldn't take any convincing to get me to leave Akatsuki."

Konan knew that for certain she'd said too much this time. Yet at the same time she felt a little better, being able to say it aloud with no consequences. Itachi would not betray her to Pain, of that she was certain. Of the little she knew of him, she knew him enough to be certain he wasn't the kind of man to betray her. The kind of man to betray her—the thought sent an uneasy shiver down her spine. She wasn't expecting betrayal, but the idea that she trusted him scared her. Someone she cared about, someone she trusted, betrayed her, and killed someone else she cared about. Someone she trusted killed Yahiko.

"And what about you, why do you want to leave Akatsuki?" Konan asked; it was his turn to do some confessing, she wasn't going to say anything more.

Itachi was silent for a moment, "I want nothing to do with Uchiha Madara's devices."

"But isn't he the founder of your clan?" Konan knew this was a similar question to the one he had asked her about being a co-founder of Akatsuki. Fair is fair, she decided.

"He is," Itachi answered, "What he wants is...something that I do not want to assist with. But like you, I cannot leave. Uchiha Madara's Sharingan is powerful, and I...would suffer tremendously at his hand if I dared betray him."

To Konan's ears it sounded like Itachi was struggling with words, not because she felt he was concealing information from her. It sounded almost like he couldn't say them, or he was forcing the words out of his mouth, as if they wouldn't go on their own. She didn't know what to make of this. Maybe it was just harder for him to talk about it, though she doubted it. She'd said plenty, but by no means had spilled the entire story. She knew that you could never truly know a person, no matter how close you were to them, or how much you told them. She found that out the hard way.

"Do you hate him?" she asked after the silence had been drawn out, "I wouldn't hold it against you, you know, if you did."

There was another lengthy pause.

"Yes," Itachi replied finally, "I suppose I do."

It was a week before Sakura's birthday. There were only seven precious days left for him to get a present for her. The thing is, he had no idea what she would want for her birthday. He at least was doing a good job of covering for Naruto while he went off with the Hyuuga girl to make arrangements for the surprise party, whatever that entailed. Recently, Naruto had approached Sasuke with a favor—a task that he could do. Naruto had told him that the worst possible thing that could happen was that if they got called away on

a mission during Sakura's birthday, and he wanted Sasuke to go down to the Hokage Tower to talk to Tsunade about it.

Sasuke figured he could do that. It was easy enough, and he doubted that the Hokage would say no. It had been just as easy to find a time to go. He conveniently went when Sakura told him she was going to do some grocery shopping. He had an hour at most.

As he climbed the stairs to the Hokage's office, he did a little reconnaissance with his senses, first of all making sure that the Hokage was at her office to start with. She was, but there were other people with her—one Sasuke recognized as her secretary, Shinzune, whose name he finally remembered. The other people he did not recognize. There were also some people standing in the approximate vicinity of the door to the office. It was clear that the Hokage was busy with somebody, and the people outside the door were people waiting to be seen. Luckily for Sasuke, the people in the office were leaving, and when Sasuke reached the top of the stairs, the next group of people had filed in.

He ignored the people who had just come out of the office as he passed him, and looked around the hallway for a place to wait. There were a few chairs set in the hall, and he seated himself in the chair closest to the door. He crossed his arms and legs impatiently; he hoped that whatever the other patrons were there for, it wouldn't take too long—it was only a matter of time before Sakura came home and found him gone. He supposed he could wait a bit, but if it took too long, he'd have to come back later.

"Thank-you for seeing us about our problem, Hokage-sama," came a voice from the other side of the door.

Sasuke's hearing was as sharp as ever, he noted with satisfaction—he wasn't intentionally eavesdropping, but maybe it could give him insight of how long the meeting would take. He didn't particularly care what they were there for, but he didn't want to worry Sakura again.

"Of course," came the calm voice of the Hokage, "We would love to be of assistance to you in your plight. You come from the Land of Waves, yes?"

"That is correct, Hokage-sama."

Sasuke remembered the Land of Waves. He couldn't really give an opinion about the place. It was where his Sharingan had first awoken, and it was also a place he had been when two noble shinobi had died for nothing. It had been a reminder to him how cruel life could be, especially for shinobi. It was a bitter memory, yet the people of the Land of Waves had been freed from the economic oppression. The last he had heard, it was starting to become a popular tourist resort.

"What seems to be the problem?"

But as with most things, the peace seemed to be short lived.

"It was more out of a collective agreement rather than actual fact, Hokage-sama, that the three of us were sent here," came the voice of the man who seemed to be in charge, "In the past, we have seen Akatsuki members drift through our small country, though they have never caused us problems before."

Sasuke froze. Akatsuki?

"Recently three members of Akatsuki have shown up and taken residence in a small inn on an island north of the Bridge Island. Though they have not caused any trouble for us yet, it is of grave concern for us," the man continued, "We have heard of Akatsuki and of the kinds of people they employ. While they have caused us no harm, we do not wish for the members present to remain. We would like to commission the talents of Konoha to extract these three unwanted outsiders from our peaceful country. We want nothing to do with them."

Three members of Akatsuki. There were how many members of Akatsuki at present? Sasuke struggled to remember. He remembered...something...from Otogakure. Orochimaru had been a previous member, but he left, so that would make nine members. But Sakura had told him that she and a councilor from Sunagakure had killed one. Eight members left? He didn't know if they replaced their members or not. Regardless, whether there were eight or ten members remaining, there was roughly a one in three chance that one of the members in the Land of Waves was Itachi.

"I see," came the voice of the Hokage, "This is of concern not only for you, but for the Land of Fire as well. The only way to your country is from land, which means they would have had to pass through this country to get to where you are. Akatsuki has been a major concern for us for a while, and your coming to us is of the utmost help. We would be more than happy to accept your request."

"Thank you, Hokage-sama!" came a simultaneous formal thanking from the three representatives of the Land of Waves.

"It could take a couple weeks to assemble a team that would be suitable for the task, did they look like they would be staying for an extended stay?" the Hokage asked.

"Excuse me, Hokage-sama," came the voice of another man, sounding younger than the main speaker, "I am the son of the owner of the inn at which the members in question are staying. Though I do not take part in the business, as I am his second son, he did tell me that if the question arose, they had booked a month's time at the inn, and made a request that the rooms remain open in the event they needed to extend their stay."

There was a pause in the room. And Sasuke could imagine the frown of concern on the Hokage's face, "I see. They are planning on staying a very long time by the sounds of it. Shinzune!"

"Hai!"

"Do we have any intelligence on what they might be after?"

Sasuke barely caught the sound of rustling papers, and then there was a reply, "I apologize, Tsunade-sama, but there has been no notable intelligence from that region in quite some time."

"I see," the Hokage said again, "As I said before, it could take a couple of weeks to assemble a team strong enough and best suited for dealing with Akatsuki. Though the process would be sped up considerably if we had an idea of whom we would be up against. Would it be possible for any of you to provide a description of any of the members?"

Sasuke hadn't realized until now, but he was on the edge of his seat, straining his hearing as best as he could. He didn't want to miss a word of what was said in the descriptions. And he barely dared hope that there would a description of Itachi.

"Yes, Hokage-sama," the first man said, "It has been conveyed to us that the trio consists of a man and two women."

"Two women?" the Hokage sounded surprised.

Sasuke didn't care about the women, though his hopes sunk. It was less likely now that the man would be his hated brother.

"Yes, the one has quite distinctive features—apparently she has blue hair which she keeps pulled up into a bun. The other woman is significantly younger, and very short. She looks to be around sixteen or seventeen, with sandy brown hair, like the fur of mouse or a weasel," the man recounted, and reflexively, Sasuke jolted at the mention of a weasel.

"A blue haired woman and a seventeen year old girl?" the Hokage mused, "Shizune, correct me if I'm mistaken, but I do not believe we have any intelligence on Akatsuki members fitting those descriptions."

"No, we do not, Tsunade-sama," Shizune answered, "It has been speculated that there be at most ten members of Akatsuki, but aside from the reputed terrorist Deidara, Akasuna no Sasori, Hoshigaki Kisame, and Uchiha Itachi, nothing is known of the other members."

The Hokage was silent for another moment, and then having seemed to have processed this information, moved on, "And the man? What of him? Can you provide a description of him?"

"Yes, he too has distinctive features," this time it was the innkeeper's son speaking again, "He has long black raven hair which he keeps tied back. He is tall and he has two lines on his face, perhaps from stress. But his most startling attribute is his eyes. They are bright red."

Sasuke felt like time had stopped. The last man was Itachi. There was no mistaking it. Itachi was in the Land of Waves, *now* —the Land of Waves was only a week away from Konoha. It would only take him seven days to reach them in Konoha, if the impulse took him. He was close, dangerously close.

"Tsunade-sama, do you think it could be...?" came the quietly shocked voice of the secretary.

"Yes, there can be no doubt about it," came the voice of Tsunade, "It is Uchiha Itachi."

Sasuke could have told her that, easily. But the question was: what was he going to do about it?

"Very well," came the voice of the Hokage, breaking of Sasuke's thoughts before they could begin, "We will accept this commission. Now, we have to discuss the price—"

Sasuke had stopped listening. In fact, he was already gone. He knew he couldn't stay there any longer and risk being found. If the Shizune woman came out into the hall and found him, they would no doubt think he had overheard. The same would hold true if he waited

until the representatives from the Land of Waves left, and entered the office shortly after. He knew that he would have to come back later, long after they had gone. It would be easy enough to pretend he hadn't heard. The only people who had seen him there was the first group of representatives that had come, and they didn't know the consequences of him overhearing what he had.

He walked out of the building rather briskly and walked in an equally stiff manner back towards the Uchiha Manor. It was only about half-way there that he was able to slow his pace to normal and think things through properly. If now was the time for revenge, it would definitely be the most convenient, this time Sasuke knew where Itachi was, this time he knew how long he would be staying there. He had decided, hadn't he? He had made his mind up about what he was going to do for revenge, even if it meant going against his mother's wishes. It was a hard choice to make, but he knew he had no other alternative.

But how would he take his revenge? Would he just leave the village like last time? That would undoubtedly get him into more trouble with the Konoha council than he already was. Granted, they had left him alone for the most part, and aside from community service—which he was steadily and dutifully working off—he hadn't suffered all that much from them. The story would undoubtedly be different if he wandered off on his own again.

But what, then? Was he going to ask for permission? Ask the Hokage herself if he could go and seek out Itachi, and eliminate him as a threat forever? He would have to admit what he had overheard, but that wouldn't really matter. The issue was would she let him? Sasuke seriously doubted she would. Of all the people to go after Akatsuki in the Land of Waves, she knew she would not pick him and Team Seven to go. They were mere Chuunin, they weren't skilled enough. Sasuke had no doubt that if he asked the Hokage, she would not only refuse his request, but she would also keep a very close eye on him.

If he left to do away with Itachi, without permission, he knew he would be in trouble. But there was no way around it: he knew he had no other choice. The only way he would get to go out against Itachi was if he left without permission. And the only way he could think of avoiding the death penalty was if he came back and turned himself in immediately. Escaping punishment wouldn't be possible, but maybe it would reduce it a little.

"Sasuke!"

Sasuke looked over his shoulder, and saw Sakura loaded down with shopping bags, coming up from behind him. He stopped and waited for her, watching her carefully as she walked up to him.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, and then a concerned look descended on her face, "Hey, what's with that serious look you've got on? Is everything okay?"

He tried to smile a little bit at her; he knew he was failing, but he always did anyways, "Everything's fine. That dobe, Naruto, left a set of his kunai with mine, so I went and returned them."

They were near Naruto's apartment, thankfully.

"Do you need help carrying the groceries?" he asked, and then without waiting for an answer, he took half of the bags from her.

"Thanks," she said with a smile, "They were kind of heavy."

"Hn," was all he could think of to answer. He listened wordlessly as she prattled on about the good bargains she had managed to find, and how the cashier that served her was new and didn't know what to do, so checking out took twice as long as usual, etc. But Sasuke was only half-heartedly listening, only listening enough to make half-hearted monosyllabic answers. Walking next to Sakura now, he realized another thing that would be almost impossible to avoid.

If he left without permission, without telling anyone at all, it would undoubtedly break Sakura's heart.

It had been a week since Itachi and Konan had arrived in the Land of Waves, with Nariko in tow. And while things were running smoothly—they had encountered no problems thus far—they had made little progress. Essentially what each day had consisted of was getting up, getting something to eat, before heading down to the beach, picking up where they last left off and looking for any signs that the three-tailed demon might be in the area.

While the land of Waves was small, it consisted of twenty-four small islands, and there would be a lot of shoreline to search. Additionally, most of the population was concentrated on the southwestern islands, near the bridge that connected to the mainland, so the farther north they traveled, the sparser the population, making it difficult to ask locals if they had seen or heard anything of the Sanbi. It was also a hassle to get to some of the smaller islands, because due to their small size, they were simply uninhabited and rarely anyone went there.

There was also Nariko to deal with, though that was not much of an issue. Nariko loved the ocean—she was especially impressed with the eastern side of the country where you could look out across the water and see nothing but endless ocean. It was mostly the matter of who was on baby-sitting duty. It was faster to look when they were split up, but both Itachi and Konan agreed that Nariko shouldn't be left to wander off herself.

Even though Nariko was being traded between Konan and Itachi, she didn't seem to mind. She was also eager to help look for the demon, which was handy—she liked to crawl over rocks and peer in tide pools, so she was the one who found the most evidence. There were dinner plate sized chunks of shed exoskeleton washed up in different places, and scales as big as Itachi's hand. All of these had the same grey-blueish colour, but unfortunately, none of the bits and

pieces in the islands they had searched seemed new—the ocean had worn away any of the luster the scales and shell.

Konan had said with confidence that if it had left, they would find smaller pieces—pieces beaten to a pulp, battered by the ocean against the rocks. That, and they had only searched the shorelines of the three most southeastern islands and a segment of second smallest eastern island—there were many more beaches that they had to examine. Tedious as it was, from time to time they would run into fishermen out working, and when asked, they would eagerly give information about the monster that had been terrorizing their waters.

It was one such morning that Itachi had come across a man in a small boat not far from shore, and after telling Nariko to stay within sight, he had walked over to the man to ask him a few questions. The fisherman was willing enough to answer, once Itachi explained vaguely who he was and what he was looking for. The fisherman willingly informed him that yes, there had been a few sightings of the large monster in recent days, though he couldn't remember when the latest sighting had been.

"Though outside the fishing community there is a lot of skepticism about the existence of this monster," the fisherman was telling Itachi earnestly; Itachi meanwhile was trying to keep a good eye on Nariko using his peripheral vision, "It doesn't like the towns, you see. Anywhere there's a lot of people, it hasn't been seen. The town council doesn't believe us. Say we're superstitious fisherman."

"Whereabouts is it usually seen?" Itachi asked; his peripheral vision was as good as staring at something without the Sharingan, and he could see Nariko clearly on the shoreline. He could also clearly see that Nariko was climbing over a set of rocks on the northern part of the beach and was growing close to wandering out of sight.

"Around the northern islands, I've heard the most of it," the fisherman continued, "There used to be a lot of good fishing up there, but recently there've been fewer, and then the sightings of that monster

were reported. Only seen it once myself, far out on the ocean, and I turned my boat around fast, I'll tell ya."

Nariko had disappeared behind a set of rocks, and for a moment Itachi thought of calling out to her, but she crept into view again, peering down a rocky crag in between two rocks. She moved away from there and then hopped down on to a section of gravelly beach, and then tried examining the crag from another angle. She slipped between the two rocks, and out of sight. Itachi inwardly sighed.

"Thank you," he said to the fisherman, "You have been most helpful."

"No problem," the fisherman answered, adjusting his fishing line, "If you manage to get rid of that monster, I know a lot of fisherman will be grateful. I know I sure will be."

"Itachi-niisama!" Nariko had slipped into sight again and was calling his name, waving at him furiously.

They had dropped the aliases now that they were no longer in the Land of Fire, but Konan and Itachi avoided using names if they could help it. Itachi was only glad that there was just one fisherman present, and not a whole market of people. Itachi turned towards her and then back to the fisherman.

"We hope to have the creature found and removed before long," he told the fisherman, "Again, thank you."

He turned away and started walking towards the beach, his feet making little splashing sounds on the water's surface. He didn't know why Nariko was calling him, but whatever it was, she seemed very excited or nervous about it. She was wringing the long sleeves of her oversized Akatsuki cloak and standing at the edge of the water. When he set foot on the gravelly beach, she gave him a slightly nervous look.

"What is it?" he asked her, his voice empty.

"I...found something," she muttered, and then hesitantly grabbed onto the sleeve of his cloak, pulling him towards the rocky crag he'd seen her examining.

There was a fissure between two rocks, and while Nariko could slip through easily, he had to squeeze through sideways. He hoped whatever she'd found in between the rocks would be worth it—he could feel wet, nameless ocean slime rubbing onto his clothes, and it smelled distinctly of seaweed. On the other side of the rocks there was a sort of nature cave. Not very large, barely enough room for Itachi to stand in, and even then he was bent over a little. The inside had been worn away by tides and was smooth, and in the middle of the ground, there was a pool of water.

"Can you feel it?" Nariko whispered, staring at the pool.

At first Itachi didn't know what she was talking about, but then as he stared at the pool too, he had a vague idea. The pool wasn't just sitting on the rock, it was a deep sinkhole kind of pool that got very deep and went down very far. Itachi doubted that even if he could fit in the hole, he could swim to the bottom. But what Nariko was talking about was the vague presence of chakra. He was surprised that she could sense it at all, and also very surprised that she had sensed it before he had. There was a slight oozing of chakra coming out of the sinkhole, a dark kind of chakra, like smog. It was the three-tail's chakra coming out of that pool. Wherever it led, it led to somewhere the Sanbi had been—recently.

"It was somewhere close," Nariko said quietly, as if she was afraid a giant tentacle would come up and grab her if she was too loud, "It was here."

Itachi nodded slowly. Thanks to Nariko, he knew they were close. Closer than they had been before.

A/N: Fishy! XD Does like fishy. Actually, no, not does like fishy. I went to look at the manga chapters again so I could write a good

description for the Sanbi. I looked at it, and I paused and thought: how the hell am I supposed to describe *that* ? Where do I even start? Best description I could come up with: It was askfjaoihginowfjsreuhjflsnsg. It's a visual description...the jumble of letters describe it perfectly. :p

As for the severe blow to the head that everyone's waiting for? (throws brick at Sasuke's head in the general direction of next Wednesday)

Chapter 66

A/N: (throws Sanbi at Sasuke's head) Throwing the Sanbi instead of a brick makes more sense to me. **Pan Sayuri** suggested it, and I took it and ran with it. To quote: "I think instead of throwing a brick at Sasuke... you could throw the Sanbi at him. That amount of askfjaoihginowfjsreuhjflsnsggh-ness connecting with his head would forcibly knock sense into him... and probably wipe his existence off the face of the planet." WIN! Though **frumyrox** came awfully close in the running by suggesting an anvil. XD **Neko-Graphic** 's suggestion of adding rockets to the brick was also a good one.

So, as a result of throwing the Sanbi, have an overdose of fluff.

Chapter Sixty-Six: A Simple Gift

It was March twenty-fifth. There were exactly three days before Sakura's birthday, and Sasuke was in a near state of panic—as panicky as Sasuke ever got. He'd thought for hours, asked numerous people, and even stayed up late thinking about it, but no matter what he tried, had absolutely no idea what to get Sakura for her birthday. Sakura didn't need material things, and as far as Sasuke knew, material things were the only types of things you could buy with money. The kind of gift Sakura would want was the type that could only be given from the heart—or that's what Hyuuga Hinata nervously stuttered out to Sasuke when she was asked. That hadn't been much help.

In the end he did the only thing he could think of doing. He asked Sakura.

"What do you want for your birthday?" he asked her in the-mid afternoon as she poured over a medical textbook, researching something or other.

She looked up at him surprise, "What?"

"What do you want for your birthday?" he repeated. It was slightly déjà vu, it wasn't that long ago that Sakura had asked him the exact same question when his birthday had come.

"I'm surprised you remembered," she said, sounding a little puzzled. She rested her book in her lap.

"I didn't. I found out from Naruto," Sasuke answered, deciding he should be truthful, "What do you want?"

"It's alright, Sasuke, you don't have to get me anything," she answered serenely, "Though it's thoughtful of you to ask."

He narrowed his eyes at her in disapproval, "When I said that I didn't want anything for my birthday, you insisted. You got me our first mission of the year for my birthday. I am going to get you something for your birthday. What do you want?"

She smiled a little. "Fair enough."

He waited patiently while she thought. He couldn't imagine what she would want—but of course, that's what led to this situation to begin with: the fact that he couldn't even guess what to get her. After a two or three minute pause, she answered.

"Alright, I've thought of something," she told him, and then there was a slight smirk on her face, "But I'm not going to tell you what it is."

He stared at her, "What?"

"I'll tell you on my birthday," she promised, and then seeing the stunned look on his face, she added with reassurance: "Oh don't worry, it's not something that'll be hard to give. Just trust me. I'll tell you in three days."

That was that. Even asking Sakura hadn't helped. She said that he had something he could give her on the day of her birthday, easily.

But he couldn't even guess then. He asked her multiple times throughout the rest of the day, but each time she would always give a small mischievous smile and say 'you'll see', before skipping off.

Sasuke was at a loss.

It was the twenty-eighth of March, the day of Sakura's birthday. And it was also eight in the morning. Sasuke felt distinctly empty-handed when he woke up that morning; he remembered lying in bed for about five minutes worrying about Sakura's present. She had assured him there was something he could get her on the day of her birthday, but he couldn't think of anything that could be given so quickly. It wasn't exactly that he didn't trust Sakura, but he found he was unable to take her at her word.

Besides, Naruto had given her a whole birthday party to be celebrated that evening, and what had Sasuke given her? Absolutely nothing. Whatever Sakura had in mind would in no way compare to what Naruto had given her, he was sure. He had to at least give her something—something in addition to the small something that she wanted.

And that was why, at eight in the morning, he found himself standing outside the door of the Yamanaka Flower Shop. The last time he had been here, it was to retrieve Ino in order to get her to spend some time with Sakura while the pink-haired girl mourned her father. That time he had confidently strode into the store and demanded Ino go spend some time with Sakura. It had been a task, straightforward and easy to do. This time however, he found himself hesitating as he stood in front of the flower shop.

Flowers seemed like safe enough things to give Sakura. They looked nice, smelled nice, didn't take up much room, and only lasted so long before their beauty expired. They didn't last long enough to collect dust. It was the best he could come up with under the circumstances, and what's more, it would at least add a little bit to

the small something Sakura wanted from him. The only problem was that he didn't know the first thing about flowers.

He reluctantly pulled open the door and stepped inside as a bell tinkled over his head. He was almost overwhelmed by the richly perfumed air that smelled so wonderful. It was only early spring, yet it was amazing how many flowers that Yamanaka's managed to have in supply. He looked around at all the different colours of petals and greenery, the different shapes, sizes, shades, hues, tints, and tried to pick out different scents. He was completely lost.

It was Ino who was minding the shop that morning—he had known this when he stood on the doorstep—and while he had hoped he would look like he knew well enough what he was doing, she spotted his bewildered expression from the far corner of the store and descended upon him like a bird of prey.

"Sasuke-kun, what are you doing here?" she asked him, swooping to his side; he knew she was dying to know.

He eyed her carefully, almost warily, as if she was dangerous, and as overwhelming as the flowers around him. He felt the back of his neck warm up a little as he avoid her gaze when he answered.

"...It's, uh, Sakura's...birthday today..." he mumbled, he rubbed the back of his neck self-consciously.

He saw a broad smile slowly spread across Ino's face as she looked back at him, "Ahhh, I see. And you wanted to get her some flowers, yes?"

"...Yeah," he mumbled again.

"Well, I'd be more than willing to help you," Ino assured him with a little more exuberance than he thought necessary, "Did you have anything in particular in mind?"

"...Not really..." he said quietly.

"Well then, how about a custom bouquet?" Ino suggested, and Sasuke saw a gleam in her eye he wasn't sure how to interpret, "I'm sure I could fix something up for you quite nicely. Why don't you come with me?"

It was quite obvious that Ino was tickled pink by the idea of Sasuke getting flowers for Sakura for her birthday, just as it was obvious that she was having excessive amounts of fun leading him around the shop, suggesting different kinds of flowers, and then taking them from the various tubs of water. She'd say things like: 'this'll brighten it up nicely' or 'this has a wonderful scent. Smell it, Sasuke-kun. Don't you agree?' or 'now this is a nice one, it came all the way from...' Sasuke followed her around like a lost animal desperately trying to get its bearings.

But the only thing that Sasuke really could recognize was when Ino brought the most extraordinary bouquet of flowers he had ever seen to the cash register. There were many different coloured blossoms, large ones and small ones, all complementing one another in colour. Sprigs of greenery poked out at the sides, creating a natural frame and outlining the colours. And an enthralling scent wafted out of the flower's centers, adding a feeling of completion to it.

"I think she'll really like it," Ino assured him, her words sounding deliberately ambiguous, but he was too amazed by the bouquet to notice, "And since it's for her birthday, I'll give you a discount, okay?"

"Thanks," he said earnestly while he shelled out the money for her.

"I'll see you at the party this evening, and say hi to Sakura for me," she said while handing him the bouquet across the counter.

He nodded while he held the flora in his hands delicately. Even though he had been completely and totally bewildered, he knew that Ino's expert hands had created for him the best birthday bouquet of flowers in all of Konoha. He did not know that Ino had a certain smile on her face as he left the flower shop, nor did he know what the bouquet of flowers he was carrying actually meant. No, to these

things he was blissfully ignorant. The only thing that he knew was that, without a doubt, Sakura would love it.

Cooking was one of Sakura's favourite things to do. She had gotten rather good at it over the years, and she liked it best when other people enjoyed what she made. When visiting others for dinner, she always like bringing a dessert or an appetizer, and she didn't mind helping out in the kitchen. That was probably the only time anyone could get away with cooking for her. If somebody tried to spare her the trouble of cooking, she often felt cheated, like they had ripped her off by stealing time away from a fun pastime. The only reason why Sasuke got away with cooking meals every second day, was because he had insisted on joint kitchen duty, and Sakura, technically being the guest in his house, complied.

That was why Sakura could be found in the kitchen on the morning of her birthday, cooking her own breakfast. She wouldn't have it any other way; starting out the morning with ingredients for a meal and then spending the quiet time preparing them, was the best way to start one's birthday in Sakura's opinion. And she contentedly stood in front of the stove, humming one of Sasuke's mother's songs.

Sasuke had disappeared earlier that morning, having left the house in a hurry. Sakura could only smile to herself at that—she knew that Sasuke was still panicking about not having gotten her anything. He probably figured that whatever he could get her in less than a day wasn't a good enough present, or something to that affect. But he had obviously thought of something to get her last minute, and she was curious as to what it might be.

She was almost finished making breakfast when she heard the back door open and close. Resisting the urge to turn around to see what Sasuke was bringing, she stayed facing the stove and waited patiently as she listened to his footsteps coming up the hall.

"Ino says hi," he said when he came to the kitchen entrance.

Sakura looked over her shoulder at him, and then paused. Her eyes widened when she saw the illustrious bouquet of flowers Sasuke was holding in his hands. She turned on the spot and stared with wonder as Sasuke walked over to her and delicately put the bouquet in her arms, almost like it were an infant. Closing her eyes she inhaled the smell of the flowers—she remembered from kunoichi training the flower-arranging lessons they had to take, and how she had to memorize many different flowers by their scents. She could pick out quite a few of them, though it was difficult, because the scents harmonized so well with one another.

Opening her eyes she examined the bouquet more closely, and her eyes widened again. There was yellow acacia, agrimony, alyssum, ambrosia, apricot blossoms, red chrysanthemums, fuchsia, honey flower, honeysuckle, milk vetch, motherwort, and red double pinks, with red bay leaves, cedar leaves, and peppermint leaves for greenery. Sakura had a good memory, and she remembered also from kunoichi training the meanings each flower had behind them.

The acacia meant secret love. The agrimony meant gratitude. Alyssum said that her worth was beyond her beauty. Ambrosia meant he returned her love; but the apricot blossoms meant that love was timid. Chrysanthemums meant love, as did the fuchsia and honeysuckle; honey flower stated a sweet and secret love. Motherwort meant a secret and concealed love. Red double pinks symbolized a pure and ardent love. And the greenery—red bay leaves: love, memory; the cedar leaves: he lived only for her; the peppermint: the cold of his fear was warmed by her love.

All together, this bouquet of flowers that Sasuke had given her was essentially saying that he was truly, chastely, and ardently in love with her. She looked at Sasuke, feeling a light blush on her cheeks. Ino had obviously had a hand in this, because there was no way that Sasuke could know that this bouquet of flowers meant. But despite that, she felt a warm feeling well up in her, enveloping her heart and glowing with love for the man who stood in front of her. The thought

itself counted towards the meaning of the bouquet in words the flowers could not.

"Thank you so much, Sasuke," she murmured, a smile glowing on her face, "I love them. They're beautiful."

She saw a crooked grin pull at the side of his mouth, "So, are you finally going to tell me what you want for your birthday? Flowers aren't enough."

The flowers were more than enough, but she knew it was pointless to argue with Sasuke. He wouldn't understand how much the flowers really meant to her. So instead, she complied, and answered him.

"What I want," she said slowly, carefully, "is this: please, Sasuke, smile for me today. Just once."

She watched his reaction carefully. The subtle expressions on his face were changing, one after another. His eyebrows went up, ever so slightly—he was surprised. And then his eyes widened a little as well and he paused—he was stunned, and unsure for just a moment. And then she saw his features soften a little, like he realized that he shouldn't have been surprised. She saw his face change to a look that was serene, and then she heard a chuckle develop in his chest. He laughed lightly, a kind laugh, a gentle laugh—a real laugh.

"Sakura, you are just so...annoying."

And then it was there, his lips pulled back into a perfect smile. He was looking at her with earnest eyes, and a tender expression on his face. The smile he wore was identical to the ones that she had only previously seen in photographs. The glowing feeling in Sakura's heart increased tenfold, and she found herself smiling back. It was the perfect gift.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Shyly, she leaned a little closer to him and stood on her tiptoes, planting a light kiss on his cheek.

When she pulled away, she looked up at Sasuke warmly. She giggled a little at the look of his face—sadly the smile had melted away to a look of mild surprise, but she was glad that there wasn't an unhappy look there. There was a look of wonderment on his face as he looked after her while she walked across the kitchen, and giving a light musical laugh, she went to put the bouquet of flowers in a vase.

This was already the best birthday she had ever had.

Ichiraku Ramen's was the most crowded Sasuke had ever seen it. It was so busy with all the guests that Naruto and Hinata had invited, that it was lucky that Sasuke was able to get a bowl of ramen at all. The last task Naruto had assigned him with was to get Sakura to come to the humble ramen stand, on any pretense. Sasuke had kept it simple and said he wanted ramen for dinner—which had surprised Sakura. But she was even more surprised when she arrived and she was overwhelmed by guests—who quickly seized her and threw her into the fray of festivities.

From where Sasuke was sitting at the counter of the ramen stand, she seemed to be having a good time. The party was thrown in her honor, and she couldn't seem to get away from anyone for long. Not that she was trying. Lee, from Team Gai, had swooped down on her and was now talking very fast, but whatever flattery he was showering on Sakura was lost to Sasuke in the noise of the others. He didn't mind though, for some reason, not like that one time.

A number of different people had been invited, though not as many as there were at Naruto's party, simply because they were limited on space. But Team Ten, Team Eight, and Team Gai were all there. Kakashi was floating around somewhere, but he had disappeared for a bit. Kanaye, however, was not present—he was out on a mission. People were mingling. Ino and Ten Ten were talking to one another in earnest while Hinata, Kiba, and the bug guy, Shino, were also

conversing about something. Lee, Naruto, Sakura, and Chouji were laughing over something Shikamaru had said. And Sasuke was content to sit and watch—to be an observer.

Sitting next to him, of course, was who Naruto had called his "number one accomplice in Anti-Social-ness", Hyuuga Neji. The two of them were quite content to watch the party from the side, like they had at Naruto's birthday party. And as before, they were silent for the most part.

"I hear that Sakura's family is not too happy of late with Sakura still living with you," Neji said conversationally at one point.

Sasuke turned his head towards him, inwardly shocked. "How do you know that?" he asked suspiciously, and then eyed the crowd for possible perpetrators.

"I hear a lot of things I'm not supposed to," Neji replied, "But I rarely speak of them, especially not to people whom it doesn't concern."

Sasuke was a little bit relieved at this—he was more or less worried that many people would know about the circumstances of present and start making their own assumptions. There were many ways that that could go horribly, horribly wrong. And he didn't need that to deal with in addition to Sakura's parents. Ever since Sakura's mom started coming, it became a matter of simply ignoring the requests. Sasuke wouldn't be home, or he and Sakura would both be gone. They avoided parts of town where they would likely run into Sakura's parents, and did not stay at home for long periods of time. They could only keep it up for so long.

"Sakura has good parents," was all Sasuke could say in reply to Neji.

"She does," Neji agreed, "But I don't see why they would become agitated now. Is it because they suddenly feel that you may perhaps infringe on some agreement you have with them?"

Sasuke turned sharply to Neji, "Ten Ten put you up to this, didn't she?"

Neji looked mildly surprised, "No, not at all. In fact, I'm surprised you think so."

Sasuke stared at Neji for a full three seconds, and then looked away, deciding that he must be telling the truth. Neji was not the sort to say such things on the behalf of other people.

"Though I don't understand why you don't let her return home," Neji said calmly, "I hear that she's staying because you want her to."

"This doesn't concern you, Hyuuga," Sasuke said coldly.

"Perhaps not," Neji agreed lightly, getting to his feet, "I was only thinking aloud, because from what I can gather, you haven't been seriously thinking about the matter at all."

He left. And Sasuke remained where he sat, thoroughly ticked. He pushed his half-empty bowl of ramen away from himself, not hungry anymore. Of course he had thought seriously about the situation, he wanted Sakura to stay but as far as he was concerned, nobody should force her to stay or leave unless she wanted to. As for him, why he wanted her to stay, well that was obvious—it was because...

Sasuke's thoughts hitched, and then stopped. There was a reason, he just didn't want to have to figure it out, that was all. But then wasn't that just what Neji had said? Was he not thinking seriously about it when he didn't bother trying to figure out why it was so important to him that Sakura stay? Instead of annoyed he felt tired, like all his irritation had just flowed out of him like a balloon losing air.

He turned away from the counter and looked out at the other guests. His eyes found Sakura easily in the crowd, and faster than ever before, now that his Sharingan had mostly returned. It was all thanks to her; after everything he had been through, no matter how far down

he'd thrown himself, she had taken his hand and pulled him to his feet again.

He watched her among all the guests, tuning out the sound around him, until he heard nothing, only saw. It was like watching a silent movie; he watched as Sakura smiled and laughed, looking this way and that, punching Naruto lightly on the shoulder, looking embarrassed at something Ino said... But he wasn't really aware of what was going on around Sakura—Sakura was his focal point, his center. He noticed only her.

The tired feeling left him, and he felt warm, not physically, but inside his chest he felt a warmth. He felt...content, he realized, watching Sakura among all these people. Seeing her happy left him feeling fulfilled—glad. Her eyes flicked over him, and then she noticed him. She smiled and gave a little wave to him; he felt a smile come on his face as well, and he waved back to her. Her attention was caught by another, but he didn't mind. He'd smiled again for her.

To think that was all she wanted from him for her birthday, it blew him away. Yet when she had asked, he felt that unidentifiable emotion emerge stronger than it had ever been before, and it seemed to take over—the smile had come so easily as a result. And afterwards, when she had brushed a light peck on his cheek, it felt like it would burst out of him.

He kept thinking of the light kiss she had doted upon him. And every time, that same emotion arose, that same... he didn't know. He hadn't known how to react to the kiss, but he also hadn't minded at all. It was puzzling to him why it hadn't bothered him, but he simply couldn't be bothered by it. He knew the unnamed emotion had to do with it. It was more familiar to him now, though—he could almost name it, like it was on the tip of his tongue.

As he looked at Sakura now, he felt it mix with the warmth in his chest. When he looked at her when she was happy, when he was with her and she sang, when she held him late at night...he felt like he was...he felt that he...he was...

Her viridian eyes caught his obsidian ones again.

...in love.

Quiet surprise held him: he loved Sakura.

And quite suddenly everything seemed to make so much more sense. All those times that she had done things for him, all those times she had been there for him, all those times she had been just so...Sakura...he realized he had fallen in love with her. It was like the key piece in the puzzle had been placed, and the picture was made so complete.

Complications instantly arose with this unexpected revelation, but he forced them aside for now. It was her birthday, she was happy and for now he was content on just watching her, loving her.

Their eyes were still locked. And politely she freed herself from the conversation that had been woven around her, and made her way over to where he sat. He saw her in an entirely different light now, it was like the most beautiful, perfect person was coming to be with him.

"Hey," she said cheerfully, sitting down on the stood next to his, "I can't believe you've let everyone else hog me. I haven't said a word to you since we got here."

"It's hard letting them," he said with a small smirk on his lips, "But are you enjoying yourself?"

"Immensely," she assured him with a grin, "But I needed a break to talk to you. It's funny, it kinda looked from over there that you got this hazy look on your face. Are you sure you're not bored?"

He shook his head, "Not at all."

"I also wanted to thank you," she said quietly, "For the second smile you gave me. Two is more than I bargained for."

He smiled softly at her again, in spite of himself. This was going to be an irreversible habit if he wasn't careful. He saw the look of surprise on her face as he smiled so easily for her a third time that day. And very suddenly, he was also compelled with the strong urge to lean in close to her, pretend to want to whisper something to her, and then instead, kiss her lips instead. But no, even he had some self-restraint. He knew he couldn't do that—the complications in his head that he had forcibly pushed aside were reminding him strongly why that would not be the smartest thing to do.

But even if he had ignored the thoughts, he wouldn't have gotten a chance. Naruto suddenly exclaimed the words 'birthday cake' really loudly, and Sakura was suddenly crowded by people and whisked away. Sasuke watched her with an amused smirk on his lips as she was led before an enormous birthday cake with eighteen candles on it. And as he watched her blow out the candles at the end of the loud chorus of Happy Birthday, he mused over his revelation.

To think that of all people he would allow himself to open up to, to allow himself to fall for, it had been Sakura. The same Sakura who had attended the Academy with him, the same Sakura who became his teammate, the same Sakura who he had snubbed and been rude to, the same Sakura who he had left unconscious on a bench and whose heart he had broken.

The same Sakura who had come into his hospital room determined to help him adjust to his blindness.

The same Sakura who had let him fall into a flowerbed when he had been impatient.

The same Sakura who had spent hours with him meticulously re-teaching him everything he could no longer do.

The same Sakura who had unearthed his deepest, darkest secrets.

The same Sakura that had slowly and patiently tempted his sight back into being.

The same Sakura whose loving patience and support was now slowly bringing back his Sharingan.

A woman he had known almost all his life, who he had seen grow from a fangirl to a strong determined woman—this was who he had been in love with for all these months without even realizing it.

"I am so full of birthday cake that I don't think I can eat anything ever again," Sakura lamented, and then laughed.

The party was over, people had dispersed; the leftovers had been packaged up and sent off with different people, and finally Sasuke and Sakura headed home as well. It was almost one in the morning when the two of them walked past the side of the house towards the back yard.

"I'm glad to be home though," Sakura said as they walked across the veranda their feet making light noise on the wooden surface, "we were out late."

"You enjoyed yourself," Sasuke stated, digging through his pockets for the key to the back door.

He, too, was glad to be home however. The mellow feeling he had felt when his revelation dawned on him had faded, and he was feeling back to normal. He wasn't so serene anymore, and his mind was a lot more focused. The best way to probably put it was that he was feeling in-character again, though he couldn't deny the existence of his feelings for Sakura. No, they were still there, but they were added to all his other feelings now too, and on the whole, he felt a lot happier, a lot more content.

Where was that key?

"I can't find the key," he muttered to himself with irritation.

"That's okay," Sakura said suddenly; she had been standing beside him quietly, looking out over the garden. The grass was green again, and a lot of Sakura's shrubs and bushes had grown tiny little leaves. It was a warm night, and it was the first time the both of them had worn their summer clothing and put their winter ones away.

"There's a spare key under the shingle on the corner, remember?" she reminded him, but she was tugging on his arm, "It's a nice night out, can we spend a little time in the garden?"

He glanced at her, and then stopped bothering looking for his key. It was a long time since he had been able to tell her 'no' to almost anything she asked. She knew how to ask something from him so that he would say yes. It was just so...annoying at times, he thought affectionately.

"Alright," he agreed, allowing her to tug him into the yard.

Dropping his arm as she leapt down onto the grass, she ran to the middle of the spacious lawn and spun a circle, her head facing heavenwards. She stopped, and then fell backwards onto the grass, her eyes still fixed on the night sky. A small smirk tugged at the corner of his lips and he walked over to where she was and looked down at her.

"The stars look so nice tonight," she said serenely, looking past him.

He glanced heavenwards, and saw the sparkling white dots throughout the midnight coloured sky. As he moved to put his hands in his pockets, Sakura suddenly grabbed his hand, and pulled. Surprised, he buckled and fell down on the ground next to her. He looked at her with a surprised look.

"That's not the best view," she said, her eyes sparkling, "Lie down and look up—that's how you're supposed to look at stars. Didn't you know?"

She was teasing him—he raised an eyebrow at her, but lay back on the cool grass as well, an arm's length from her, looking up. She was right—it was better this way. A wider spectrum of sky was spread out before him, the dark blue-black of the night complimenting the silvery sprinkles.

"Today is easily the best birthday I ever had," he heard Sakura say, but she wasn't directing it at him. He didn't answer.

It had been a good day—a very good day. He felt so happy right now, more than he had in years; the atmosphere was so perfect that he never wanted it to end. And now, at the closing of the day, one last perfect, beautiful moment was bringing things to a finish. There were things he could be thinking of, worrying about, but this day was not the day to do it. That was what tomorrow could be for.

His vision was so sharp—a gift given to him by the woman lying less than three feet away. The stars were so clear, like sparkling pinpricks—he could tell which ones were planets easily—they ones that only glowed, not sparkled. As for the moon, he could see each crater, each graying marking on its white face, so clearly. He lifted his hand up to the heavens, moving it so that it looked like it was brushing the side of the moon. It wasn't a full moon—it was close though, in a few days it would be a full white perfect orb.

He let his hand drop down again, but he let it fall towards Sakura, perpendicular to his body. Turning his head towards her, he looked down the length of his arm to the pink-haired kunoichi. She had fallen asleep on the lawn, and she was lying facing him, her pink strands tucked behind her ear. He felt an affectionate smile pull at his lips, and he rolled onto his side so that he was facing her too.

Even without the Sharingan activated, in the light of the moon, he could see each detail. The rise and fall of her chest, the way the light breeze shifted the few strands of her hair, he could even see the woven threads in the fabric of her shirt. He extended his reach a little further, so that he could touch the tips of her hair, and let his fingers

run through them. She really was beautiful—and to think there was a time when he might have never gotten to see her like this.

His time of being blind was something he never wanted to experience again. He had been trapped in his body, his whole world dark. He could hear, he could feel, but he was trapped. His vision was the window to the world—the Sharingan was part of his blood, he needed to see, just like he needed to breathe. When he was blind, it was like he was choking. He could see the world now, he could see everything, every detail, every flutter of movement. He realized now, how much his sight was part of him, and how much his perspective had changed from knowing that choking feeling. He had seen only horrors before, and never appreciated the beauty. He did now: he saw the beauty, not just the bad.

How much longer they lay there didn't matter. It could have been minutes, it could have been hours. It was all relative to Sasuke. But eventually he sat up, dusted the grass off of himself and picked Sakura up from the ground without waking her. He found the key easily this time—strange how he hadn't been able to find it before—and took her inside.

In a way, he never wanted this day to end, because he knew that inevitably, tomorrow would be another day, a day where he could no longer ignore the world and the danger it posed for them.

A/N: That was not The Kiss . For those who were disappointed. No, there is a *real* kiss coming. Next chapter to be exact, for those of you who pay attention and actually read these things. :p Be excited, I command you!

Chapter 67

A/N: ALERT: Kiss

Chapter Sixty-Seven: You're Annoying

Nariko had been keeping careful count of how many days they had spent in the Land of Waves. It had been ten days since the three of them had arrived, and so far, they had found nothing. Well, she thought to herself, it wasn't that they had found nothing, but they hadn't found much. The further north they traveled—or at least Itachi had told her they were going north—the more signs they found, but aside from that condensed bit of chakra which she had found completely by accident, there had been nothing more than debris of wrecked ships and an increased number of scales.

Nariko wasn't one to be down about this though. Because even though they had left Amegakure almost a month ago, she was quite enjoying the sun and the temperate ocean climate. The ocean was so much bigger than she had imagined, that it sometimes just boggled her mind staring out over the endless water. Demon or no demon, nothing could destroy that for her. And as long as there was no demon, they would stay longer in the Land of Waves.

She hopped across the beach kicking up sand as she went. It was hard running on sand, she had noticed, she got tired so much quicker than before, and she would often get it in her sandals, which rubbed against her feet. She liked being barefoot on the sandy beaches, but Itachi told her to wear her shoes when they were close to some wreckage—he told her that he didn't want her stepping on something she shouldn't. It seemed like he was still worried that she would hurt herself—but she hadn't hurt herself on anything in a long time. She'd stopped trying to find ways to weaken her body, because

she was going to try and convince them to never go back. She was counting on it.

She hadn't raised the issue though, not since the one time she had casually brought it up and then left it. She supposed now, ten days into their arrival at this peaceful place that didn't seem to have rain, should be the time she started mentioning it again.

She jogged up to where Itachi was standing, his hand rested on the side of an overturned boat on the beach, a gaping hole in the bottom, and numerous scratches on its side. He was bent closely to it, examining it closely, though Nariko couldn't figure out what he was hoping to achieve by looking at it so closely. Momentarily distracted, she asked about it instead.

"Is there something interesting on that boat?" she asked, cocking her head to the side.

"These marks were created by the demon," Itachi murmured in answer, "There are slight traces of chakra residue left behind."

"Are we all that close to finding the demon?" Nariko asked looking away from the scratches and instead at the tall silent man standing in front of her.

"Unfortunately no, no closer than we were last week," Itachi answered, dropping his hand away from the boat and turning to continue to walk up the beach.

"Flower-chan says she hopes we don't find it soon," Nariko said, conjuring up an idea in her head as she followed behind him.

"Did she now?" Itachi mused in absent response.

"Yup, she doesn't want to go back to Amegakure if she can help it," Nariko quipped, continuing to lie, "Not anytime soon anyways."

Itachi didn't say anything in response so Nariko, taking this as a good sign decided to continue.

"I don't really want to go back either, Itachi-niisama," she said casually, "The rain is so...gloomy, and it's always wet. No matter where you go. The blankets are always damp and it feels like the Leader is watching *all the time* . I don't like it there..."

Itachi slowed his pace and glanced at the small girl, but then looked away. The look in his eye silenced her for a moment. The glance had been penetrating, and almost searching, investigative. Nariko for an instant was afraid that maybe she was taking things in the wrong direction. She should maybe talk more of Flower-chan? No, that would not be a good idea, because if Flower-chan and Itachi talked to one another, it could be bad if they found out she was lying.

Nervously, she continued, "Do we really have to go back?"

From Itachi's point of view, it sounded like she knew everything—about her fate, and how that upon their return to Amegakure, that the demon that was trapped within her would be removed, thus killing her. As for Nariko, she was too nervous about the consequences for saying what she had to even worry about the fact that she was going to die by the hands of Akatsuki. Itachi stopped; Nariko crashed into him.

"Why do you not want to go back?" he asked her calmly.

She started at him, rubbing her head a little, "Huh?"

"Why do you want to remain here, and not return to Amegakure?" he asked, his voice still calm, but calm in a deadly way.

Nariko was scared at first, but then she felt a seed of determination take root. She didn't care about herself, the fact that she hadn't run away with Haruno when she found out what would happen to her was enough to show that. She put a stubborn and determined look on her face.

"Because you're not happy! Flower-chan's not happy! Nobody in Akatsuki seems happy!" she exclaimed, putting a pout on her face, "You both don't like the leader, you both want to leave—we're gone now, we don't have to go back. I don't want to go back. I want to stay with you and Flower-chan, but I don't want you to be unhappy. Can't we just...be like a family? A family here? And not in Ame?"

"What about your demon?" Itachi asked her, "Don't you want it removed?"

"I don't care," Nariko said, " *You* don't hate me."

This was true. She didn't know any of the villagers in the town she had come from, she didn't have any attachment to her family or her neighbors—if they had cared about her at all she wouldn't have been locked up where she had been when Itachi found her. No, she only had asked Itachi if the villagers would accept her because those were the only people she had ever known of before. She had longed to be accepted. But the ones who had accepted her were those who had come and rescued her. Yes, they were trying to kill her, but not because they hated her. Flower-chan and Itachi both accepted her.

"You accept me, even though I have a demon," she said, "And if that doesn't matter to you, then I don't care if it's gone or not."

Itachi was silent for a long moment, and then finally he gave a slow nod, "You are right, I am not happy in Amegakure."

He started walking again. And Nariko waited in vain for him to say something further, to accept or reject her idea, or explain his answer and actions. But no response came and she didn't understand.

The day after Sakura's birthday was a designated rest day. They had no missions coming up in the near future, and for all intents and purposes, Team Seven was on standby. Sasuke took this time to take all things into consideration, the serenity of yesterday was gone, and now Sasuke had to start being serious about his revenge.

How much of threat Itachi actually was, was determined by how much the deaths of Sasuke's friends would affect him. That being said, Itachi was a huge threat, and after last night, Sasuke knew that there was no way he could let Itachi loom over him any longer, because if he didn't act before his elder brother did, he would be too late. Sasuke knew he had to take things in his own hands. He knew where Itachi was this time, and it was too perfect an opportunity to let slip by. And the sooner he left the better.

But there was only one problem...and that was Sakura.

He walked towards the back door of the house, his hands in his pockets, brooding quietly. Sakura was outside gardening, uncovering her plants from their winter blankets and allowing the fresh greenery to shoot up bright and beautiful. It was something she had wanted to do for a couple weeks, and the time off they had was perfectly fine with her.

He stepped out on the veranda, and watched her for a bit. He could hear her humming from where he was standing, and he felt guilty. He was going to leave, without telling her and without telling her why, or when he would be back. She wouldn't even know that he would be coming back. And when he did, he would face punishment for what he had done. But it was better than the alternative—better than having the one woman he had ever loved killed by the one person who had stolen everything away from him.

Don't ever disappear on me Sasuke. Don't ever leave me alone to wonder why you left.

There was something he should say to her, he wanted to say... something, anything, to give her some idea that he would be coming back. Just some phrase, some word, that when he was gone, she could say to herself: "Yes, I know he'll come back."

Hopping down from the veranda, he softly tread across the grass in his bare feet, feeling the cool of the moist ground between his toes. Everything seemed to make itself apparent to him—the moisture of

the air, the sound of her humming, the grass between his feet. He came up behind her, and then slowly he sat down, fumbling for something to say. It was possibly the last day off they would have together before he left, and he wanted to make it...memorable? He wasn't sure. She looked at him with a curious look, a smile on her face.

"Do you need any help?" he asked her finally.

"Sure," she said with surprise, but looked delighted all the same, "If you want."

Sasuke was quickly put to work with a trowel, helping her dig holes for some of the new plants she had bought to replace any that had died over the winter. It was a different experience for him, gardening; he might have found more enjoyment in the task if he was not so heavily burdened by his thoughts—if he was not so worried that his delicate cherry blossom might fade before its time.

There was just something about her he couldn't quite pinpoint—something that made him look at her differently than he ever looked at any other woman before. Something about the way she moved, something about the way she walked, the way she did things; it allured him like nothing had ever done before. He wanted to touch her, be near her, feel that alluring movement while he held her, his hands on her.

But it wasn't just her body; no, he looked at her far deeper than that. The way she smiled caught him too, the way her lips curled when she was happy, the way they moved when she spoke his name, the way they flowed as she sang. Something about it compelled him to kiss them, to experience what they felt against his own.

But it wasn't only the things she said either, it was the things she did. How she did every task with such caring, how she led him along with such tenderness, the way her eyes lit up for him in a way that they didn't light up for others. It was the way she loved him that he found

compelling, and somewhere along the way of loving him, he had fallen in love with her too.

And he could only hope that there would be some day when he could tell her. To be able to say to her that he loved her. He wanted her to be happy.

His thoughts slipped back into the darkness of misery. If only he could tell her now—but even then it would be too risky.

"If there's ever a time when you would never see me again," he started, already feeling that he was being too direct, "Do you think you could ever find it in yourself to forget all the wrongs I've done to you, and only remember the reasons why you'd miss me?"

He saw the happiness on her face fade to alarm and then freeze there. After a second, it faded away, and she looked at him, smiling. The smile did not match the look in her eyes, behind her eyes he saw worry and sadness. His words had scared her, but she didn't want to let him know it.

"Sasuke, it seems that you still don't know that even now I've already forgiven you," she answered slowly, a tinge of melancholy to her voice that hadn't been there earlier, "What brought this on all of a sudden?"

He was hesitant for a moment, but replied in a natural enough voice: "I had a dream when we were in Kumogakure. I dreamed that everyone said I had left again, and that you had died because of it. Something this morning reminded me of it."

The dream had happened, so he was sort of telling the truth. But he was being deceptive of his own intentions. Again, he felt guilty. But if he told her the truth, he knew she would be deeply upset. So he kept his mouth shut, and hoped that on his return that she would be able to forgive him once again.

"You wouldn't die if I left, though, right?" he had to know.

"It doesn't matter," Sakura replied, sounding like she was seeking reassurance, "Because you're not going to leave again, right?"

"No," he replied—not permanently at least. Unless, of course, he lost to Itachi, and was killed, "But what if I didn't have a choice, what if I was killed on a mission?"

Why did he keep asking these questions? Every one of them was hurting her, scaring her. But he needed assurance. He needed to know that she would be okay if he left this world without meaning to.

"The time when I thought you were dead is a time I hope I never have to repeat," was all she answered, and then after a few moments' silence asked: "Why are you asking me these things, Sasuke? You make it sound like you feel like you're going to die soon."

He had gone too far, he knew it, but at the same time, it took him where he wanted to go. This was where he could say the words that would assure her that he would come back, that she would at least have these words to remember when he was gone.

"I would never willingly leave you, Sakura," he told her, looking her in the eye, "No matter where I go, I will always come back."

Getting packed without Sakura noticing was hard. It was difficult to find time to put extra clothes and tools in his backpack, and make a bed roll without her noticing the extra bedding and clothing were missing. Also, since he had talked to her in the garden earlier that day, she had been keeping an eye on him. The only time he managed to get away without having to worry about her being suspicious of him was when he offered to stock up their refrigerator. And the only reason he had offered was so that he could buy some food to take along without Sakura noticing that their store of non-perishables was missing some items.

He felt like a fugitive in his own house, and he felt even more like he was trying to deceive Sakura. He was, in a way, but he didn't mean any harm by it. It was to protect her.

He reflected on this as he was walking home, bags held in his hands, thinking of methods of sneaking the food he had bought to where his backpack was. There wasn't much left to pack, and then after the food went in, it was a matter of waiting so that Sakura wouldn't suspect anything. He was going to leave tomorrow, on March thirtieth, after Sakura had fallen asleep. He'd practiced his skills and ninjutsu regularly, and his Sharingan was returning quickly. He now had three tomoe in his left eye, and two in his right. It wasn't at its full potential, but it was close. He felt confident that he could face Itachi on equal footing. And he had an advantage: Itachi thought he was sightless.

On the night of the thirtieth, he would head quickly and directly to the Land of Waves—a journey that would take him a week if he paced himself. There he was likely to find Itachi and his teammates; how Sasuke was going to deal with said teammates, he wasn't sure yet, but he knew that even though the Land of Waves was a small country, it would still take him some time to find Itachi. He would figure things out by then.

And when he found Itachi, well then...

A cat streaked across the path in front of Sasuke and he almost tripped over it. Startled he took a step back and stared at it. The cat stared back, and then leapt on top of a nearby wall, walking along the top. The cat was brown—the same colour brown as his mother's hair. He felt his mouth go into a grim line, remembering her last and final request of him. He walked over to the wall, looking up at the cat as it nonchalantly ignored him.

"Hey...cat," he said awkwardly.

The cat peered at him curiously, looking more interested that he had made noises than actually responding to his call. He felt a little stupid

talking to this cat, but he couldn't think of anything better.

"Tell Nekomata to tell my mother that...I'm sorry, but I can't uphold her final wish," he said quietly.

The cat stared at him for a second longer, unblinkingly. And then, as if it had understood in some vague way, it looked away and jumped into the yard on the other side of the wall. Sasuke didn't know if cats had any connection with Nekomata, but it was the best he could do. He truly was sorry—he was going to be breaking Sakura's heart and going to make his mother cry. What kind of person was he?

Sakura was a light sleeper. It was part of her job to be ready and alert the instant she was called onto the medical field, and it didn't take much to wake her. Especially when she had something on her mind that was bothering her. And there was something bothering her—and it was obvious who was the source of that. Sasuke had been acting strangely.

For a few months, she had observed Sasuke closely—actually, it was since his sight started returning, that was when she first started paying attention to him. She wouldn't put it past him to gain more confidence in himself when his sight returned, and would have a better time with his skills. That was why she was worried—because she was afraid for the longest time that Sasuke would want to take revenge against Itachi.

There were days where he seemed driven, and there were also days when he seemed in a gloomy mood. Sometimes the things he said, or the way he avoided talking about certain topics made Sakura suspicious about what he was really thinking. To him, his brother was a threat, and even though Sasuke had changed so much in the last year that they had spent together, his fundamental beliefs would not have changed.

And these past two days had been the strangest she'd seen him. On the day of her birthday he walked around in a sort of daze, as if he

was seeing everything again for the first time, like the world was suddenly different. And the next day he moved about the house in a deliberately casual manner, and was disappearing around the house. She didn't know what he had been doing, but she couldn't see anything different. And then today, he had acted almost completely normal, like nothing had happened the past two days. She wasn't sure what to make of it, if anything.

But when she and Sasuke went to bed that evening, she soon discovered that she had to be very worried indeed. Everything had been normal: they had crawled between the covers, adjusted their positions so that they were holding each other lightly and comfortably. They said goodnight and soon afterwards, drifted off to sleep. But for Sakura, it wasn't long before she woke again—she had awoken because even though she reached, she couldn't find Sasuke. And when she had actually woken, she saw that he was gone.

She didn't have to wait a few minutes to know that he was not in the bathroom. Reaching over desperately she put her hand on his side of the bed. It was cold, he had been gone more than ten minutes, that was all she could determine. Flinging back the covers she let her mind race through possibilities—how long had he been gone? If he had been gone for x amount of time, then he could have gotten as far as distance y . Inner Sakura, who had been tranquil for the past number of months was now working over time trying to put pieces together. Simply judging by the time they went to bed, Sakura figured he wouldn't have gone far. And she knew for a fact—simply because she knew him well enough—that he would have visited his parents' graves before leaving the village.

Out the door she ran, her heart racing in her chest. How long he spent in the graveyard or how close he was to the village gates was hard to guess. But she knew she had to make it to the gates before he did—she knew a shortcut. To run across people's roofs at the hour of night like she was now was considered an unwritten no-no, but under the circumstances, she didn't care. Her feet took her

across the tiles almost like she was flying, using chakra to propel herself further. She reached the gates in less than five minutes.

The two gate guards were gone, probably on the trade off of their shifts—there was no commotion, just silence. She didn't know what she was expecting, she knew that Sasuke could be gone already, but she wasn't going to give up hope. She calmed her breath and waited until her heart rate decelerated before she slowly began walking the length of the path that led out of the village, starting from the gates and moving inwards. She shivered a bit. She had only traded her pajama pants for a pair of normal ones, and grabbed a normal shirt out of the closet before flying out the door. She pulled her red tank top over her spaghetti strap one—if she had had more time, she would have grabbed something with sleeves.

Her feet took her down the path, the moonlight spilling on the road, illuminating it for her. It was a full moon now, and the silvery light shone clearly, unobstructed by clouds. The gate disappeared from view behind her when she rounded the bend, and it was only then when she heard the quiet tapping of sandals on cobblestone.

Sakura heard the approaching footsteps with a sinking feeling; those footsteps could belong to anyone, but she was certain it was him. Slowly, she walked forward so that she could see around the bend, and anguish tore at her heartstrings as she saw the familiar figure walking down the center of the path. He was wearing black again, like he had before, and there was a backpack slung over his shoulder—the only difference between back then and now, was that he was wearing the Konoha forehead protector, the scratch mark catching the moonlight.

She stood in the middle of the path as he approached, and simply watched him. He glanced at her as he walked closer, but said nothing, continuing along as if she was not there at all.

"Why is it that whenever this happens," she murmured quietly as he drew level with her, "you walk by like I'm not even here?"

"I'm hoping that you will understand—apparently you still don't," he replied, passing by without stopping, his eyes fixed on the road ahead of him, "How did you know I was here?"

"I don't know...maybe I just know you too well..." she responded quietly, and after a moment's pause, Sakura spoke up again, "...So here we are again, in a familiar setting, a familiar situation... I think the moon was even full back then too."

"It would certainly seem that way," he answered plainly in reply, continuing to walk away, not even glancing over his shoulder as he went.

"Stop."

She heard him halt, and she turned slowly to face him, her heart heavier than she could ever remember it ever being before. He had lowered his gaze slightly, so that it rested on the ground, a few meters from where he stood. She clenched her fists as she stared at his back, her eyes brimming with tears—this scene was so memorable that it stuck out acutely in her mind. Things were almost exactly the same, but she refused to let it be the same—she would not let it end as it did before. She was going to stop him this time.

"Why are you doing this, Sasuke?" she demanded as a tear escaped her eye and ran down the side of her cheek

"Itachi lives; my clan still needs to be avenged," he replied bluntly.

"Revenge is first and foremost the most important," she stated forlornly, "I was hoping that perhaps maybe you had changed your mind, instead of hurting everyone again—everyone, and me."

"Nothing else can come before my revenge," he told her with a bitterness she hadn't heard in months, he was acting so cold; she couldn't understand, "The cost of failure is unforgivable. I am still an avenger, that is one thing that will not change."

"After all the time we spent together, after all the hard work we went through, the restored friendships? The retied bonds? After all you've told me?" she asked incredulously, two more tears running down her face as she did so, "Now that your vision has returned, have you been blinded again, Sasuke?"

"No," she heard him muse quietly, "I can see clearer now than I've ever seen before."

"I'm not so sure," she replied, her voice cracking slightly, "I love you, Sasuke. I've told you that before... The times when you were gone were the some of the loneliest times I have ever felt—despite my family...and my friends. I never told you this, but I fell into depression for two years after you left. I didn't know what to do with myself, without you nearby, I... I didn't feel like I had anything to work for. What was my purpose, if not to make you happy? How could I do that...when you weren't even there?"

"I became a medic in hopes that I could do something to become stronger, to prove that I could do something with myself. I realized if you wouldn't come back on your own, I would have to bring you. I didn't have much time, and I knew that maybe the only way to save you was if I pulled Orochimaru's soul out of your body shortly after he had taken over. But I was too inexperienced to think of a way, and I ran out of time.

"Last year, when it was around the time that Orochimaru was to take you for a vessel, I wore black—all black. I mourned you, Sasuke, like you were dead. I missed you so much, and the thought that you were as good as dead left me crushed. I had lost what was possibly the most important thing in the world to me. You cannot imagine how glad I was when you were found and brought back. It didn't matter to me if you were blind or not, because you were alive, you were here—I didn't feel alone anymore.

"But...but if you leave again... You said to me once that I never thought enough for myself, that even I should be allowed to act

selfishly once in a while. Well, this is it Sasuke. I'm going to be selfish. I want you to stay. ...Please."

He turned slightly so that he could look over his shoulder and gaze intently into her eyes. "I will be coming back," he stated bluntly.

"I'm not so sure," she repeated, "I'm worried, Sasuke. Don't leave—please don't."

"You can't change my mind, Sakura," he replied coldly, turning away from her and looking down the path once again, "I *will* do this."

She clenched her jaw and stiffened so that she could react quickly if she had to. "Then I will have to stop you," she stated composedly, though her voice wavered and the tears were still flowing heavily down her cheeks, "And this time...you won't get away."

He said nothing in return but began to walk unhurriedly down the road again, his footsteps slow and regular. Sakura took up a fighting stance, preparing to rush at him if she had to—she would not let him leave, not again.

"Don't walk away from me!" she hollered after him, bracing her legs, preparing to rush towards his receding back.

The instant her foot put the slightest pressure against the ground, his form vanished from before her, his remarkable speed allowing him to move even faster than he had back then. Closing her eyes for a moment, she searched for his presence, and suddenly it appeared clearly behind her—she opened her eyes, not letting her guard down, but held her ready position.

"Just like you do, Sakura, I also don't make promises I can't keep," he told her quietly, "I will be back."

Whirling about quickly, Sakura swung her arm about, her palm outwards and fingers together. She brought about her body with grace, thrusting her arm forward with as much force as she could

muster. There was a long, prolonged silence as the both of them froze, not moving from the positions in which they stood. Sasuke's hand was raised, and Sakura's palm was braced against his wrist, preventing the blow to the neck that he had intended on delivering to her.

She stared fiercely out at him from her emerald eyes, which were blazing with a ferocious determination even though the tears were still streaking down her face. " *Why?* " she demanded, her voice severe and menacing.

Neither of them moved for a few more lengthened moments before Sasuke lowered his arm, a quiet exhalation escaping him. Sakura let her arm fall as well, and only relaxed her guard slightly, still remaining tense enough to react to sudden movements. She knew that Sasuke had the potential to overpower her if it came right down to fighting, but there would be much noise and collateral damage if they did engage in combat. Someone would most likely hear them and come help.

"You're not making this any easier, Sakura," Sasuke said ambiguously, breaking the silence that had been hanging around them like a thick shroud.

She narrowed her eyes in confusion. What was he trying to get at? Did he mean that she was physically making his passage difficult? Or did he mean that she was making it emotionally difficult for him to leave? About to ask him what he was saying, Sakura suddenly found herself unable to do so.

Unexpectedly, Sasuke had slipped an arm around her waist, pulling her close to him, a serious expression on his face. They stared at one another for a moment in silence, Sakura taken completely by surprise while Sasuke just studied her absorbedly, like he was committing her face to memory. A light breeze blew over them, a few new leaves jarred from the trees fell around them, but there were no clouds tonight. He reached out with his free hand and drew his index finger along the line of her jaw, stopping at her chin, a slight pressure

urging her face to come closer. Sasuke leaned down towards her and Sakura closed her eyes slowly as he placed a soft kiss upon her lips.

Everything that mattered suddenly seemed to have been abandoned as Sakura's mind skidded to a halt—only registering that Sasuke was holding her, the person she loved and cared about most in the world—the person who was trying to leave her behind. She wrapped her arms around him, pulling herself further into the embrace, Sasuke holding her carefully close to him, as if she would break.

The kiss came to a gentle end and Sakura opened her eyes, staring up at him in wonder and uncertainty. Unsurprisingly, his face was emotionless and serious, but behind his eyes she saw the flicker of many conflicting emotions—sadness, longing, fear. She bit her lip and hid her face in his shoulder, crying quietly into his shirt, feeling the warmth of his body against hers.

"Sakura..."

She found herself clinging tighter to him, her fingers clutching the fabric of his shirt back, afraid to hear what he had to say.

"You can be so unbelievably annoying."

Despite the tears coursing down her cheeks, a wry smile appeared on her face. There was a gentleness in the way that he said it that caused Sakura to feel a feeling of relief. Annoying... He had called her annoying last time, but unlike last time, it was going to be different. She had reached him, she had stopped him; everything was going to be okay.

Swiftly, a sharp strike was bestowed to the back of her neck, causing a shock wave to travel down the length of her spine and up the rest of her neck, imparting a numbness to her brain. Surprise flooded her as she realized what had just happened; her mind was darkening, her awareness fading, and only one thought remained floating in her

mind before she lost consciousness. She had let her guard down, and now Sasuke was going to leave...again.

She collapsed in his arms; Sasuke held onto her firmly so that she would not fall to the ground. Loose strands of hair had fallen into her face and the tears were wet on her cheeks; she had a pained expression on her face, mixed with that of absolute sorrow. He wished that he did not have to leave her in such a state, but she had given him no choice. He had hoped to steal away in the night, and not be discovered missing until the next morning, because he knew she would try to stop him. But she had noticed something out of place, and come after him—she knew him.

Holding her close for a moment longer, he felt the gentle rise and fall of her chest, heard her soft and uniform breathing. He adjusted her in his arms slightly so that he could pick her up and carry her, bridal style, over to the nearby stone bench that was along the road. Funny how things ended up—this was the same bench that he had left her on before.

Why did she have to know him so well? Why, Sakura...why did she have to make it so hard for him? He had sensed her ahead of him on the path, and his heart had sunk, but it was too late to change his course of action. He needed to make what seemed to be a clean break: short, abrupt, uncaring answers, no explanations. He hated having to talk so coldly to her, to hurt her by making her think he didn't care. It couldn't be farther from the truth, and he hoped she knew that now.

He lowered her head carefully onto the stone surface, like she was a fragile flower that would break if not treated with care. Delicately he brushed the loose strands of hair out of her face with his fingers, looking down upon her unconscious form, the cool evening breeze fluttering the pink tresses slightly. He bent down and brushed his lips against Sakura's forehead, only daring to do this because he sensed that there was nobody nearby. He reminded himself that he was doing this for her.

Sakura...how many times had she always been there for him? And even now as he had been leaving, she had come once again to his side. She had seen him at his weakest, seen him afraid. She was always there for him, by his side, watching out for him. She tried so hard to understand him, even though she couldn't begin to understand. And she had helped him when she could, even if there was nothing that she *could* do. She had always helped and supported him for as long as he could remember. Whether it was offering to help him study at the Academy, running to his side on their genin missions, or holding him until his nightmares faded away, she had always been there. And no matter how hard he had pushed her away, or how rude he had been to her, she gave everything for him and saved nothing for herself. And even though it had taken forever to realize, he realized it now: he loved her.

And he was afraid.

That was why he was doing this; that was why he was leaving that very night. He had discovered a weakness in himself, and he had to get rid of the ever-looming threat before his weakness was used against him. He had to eliminate Itachi before Itachi killed Sakura.

He knew how she would have responded if he had tried to explain to her; she would have said that everything was all right, and she could handle herself. He knew that she wouldn't listen if he said that his whole clan hadn't been all right; so that's why he stood over her now, her unconscious form lying gently quietly on the bench. He didn't want to leave her, but he knew the only way to guarantee he could always be by her side, was if he did what he decided to do.

It was the peak of spring, and he wasn't too worried about her being cold, and this path was well used, she should be found before long. Stepping away from her, he looked at her cataleptic figure once more before reaching back to the pouch where he kept his supplies and withdrew his blindfold. He unrolled the fabric and covered his eyes, wrapping it around his head below his forehead protector, tying it securely at the back.

Focusing his chakra carefully, he let out a quick pulse around him, feeling for his senses to pick up the rough outline of his surroundings, and paint a picture in his head. He began to walk forward again, down the path, knowing that to the ordinary person it appeared that he was walking blindfolded—but with his senses, Sasuke could see the world around him precise acuity. Despite his back being turned to the young woman who lay out cold on the bench, he could sense her, and it made his leaving only the more difficult. But he would be back. He swore it. And he knew he could be killed for doing this, be imprisoned for the rest of his life for doing this, or be exiled for betraying Konoha once again.

But he didn't care if he had to live in exile...

...just as long as Sakura was safe.

A/N: I wrote the whole parting scene on February 9th, 2007. And it is two whole freaking years later that I can actually include it! There's your kiss, people. I hope it was worth it. I certainly feel that it is. For those of you who are freaking out: Mwahaha.

And despite what people are thinking, yes, I have, in fact, managed to finish the story within the next six chapters. I don't know how I did it, but I did—I too was expecting a lot more chapters needed to conclude the story, but nope. I did it.

P.S.: Please don't kill me. ._.

Chapter 68

A/N: (dodges the sharp objects thrown at her) I just thought I'd remind everyone my views on genres: angst *good* , tragedy *bad* . I hope that relieves some of you.

And **Tek Jounin** gets an honorable mention because my editor and I were laughing so hard that we could hardly breathe: "I hope the Uchiha boys come to an understanding that would make Mikoto proud. And then Nariko can marry a fisherman and spawn a bunch of electric eel babies, while Itachi and Konan open a dango stand. :) Then Sasuke can go home & get busy with Sakura." Electric Eel Babies = WIN! I love all the happy endings that people keep requesting for our messed up Akatsuki family. I should start collecting them and make some sort of album in the Extras, or something. XD

Anyways, the following is another part of the story that I wrote two years ago. This one was written on February 21st. It's kinda mind boggling to think that I'd thought ahead in such detail for two years. But it's good to write ideas down, because I've forgotten most of the details for a Legend of Zelda epic I had in my head a couple of years back...actually, it was six months before I wrote this story that I was tinkering with that one. (ponders)

Chapter Sixty-Eight: Faith

Naruto was walking with Hinata and Neji in the early spring light of morning. The three of them had been put together as a rag-tag team to get rid of some bandits in a nearby town—a C-ranked mission. Naruto was groaning mentally over the whole ordeal. Not only was he not on his own team for this one, but it was too easy too! Why couldn't he be sent on a B-ranked mission once in a while? They only plus side was that Hinata was on the team; and Neji was an

okay guy in Naruto's opinion. But still, a C-ranked mission?! How was he supposed to get any experience if he didn't get anything harder?!

He looked up at the sky as they wandered down the path that led to the village exit; it was so early in the morning too! The sun was just coming up in the east and a pale, pinkish-purple glow was in the sky.

"Cheer up, Naruto-kun," Hinata said quietly, poking her fingers together, "We'll just finish the mission and come back again quickly. I'm sure that Tsunade-sama will send you on a B-ranked mission with Team Seven next time!"

"Yeah," Naruto put his hands behind his head, "But I wish I could have gone on a B-ranked mission with you, Hinata-chan! I wanted to show off how strong I was!"

"Well, I already know you can do anything, Naruto-kun," Hinata breathed shyly, "You can always—"

"There's something lying up ahead," Neji said suddenly, "Lying on that bench over there."

Both Naruto and Hinata stopped talking, following his line of vision. Indeed there was something lying motionless on a bench up ahead, and even in the dimness of the morning light, it was quite obvious what it was.

"It looks like a body," Hinata said with alarm.

The three of them hurried up to the bench to investigate further, but as they got closer, Naruto recognized that head of pink hair, and that familiar red outfit. It felt for a moment he couldn't breathe for shock, but then, his concern came out vocally.

"Sakura-chan!" he exclaimed, running over to her side, he grabbed her shoulders and shook them vigorously, hoping, begging for some sort of response. It was obvious she was alive, but so many things

didn't make sense. Why was she on this bench? If she was asleep she should have woken right away—why was she unconscious? Where was Sasuke? Why had he let Sakura stay out here at night?

"Sakura-chan!" Naruto shouted her name again.

Neji and Hinata peered over his shoulders, but he scarcely noticed. He continued to shake her shoulders, not deterring in determination until he got some response. After a minute, a low moan of pain escaped from the woman he loved like the sister he never had. Her eyes slid open and then after a pause, they slid to meet his.

"...Naruto...?" she murmured quietly.

A sigh of relief came from both Hinata and Naruto, both thankful that she had finally awoken. Naruto eyed her with concern. Reflexively he dropped his hands from her shoulders before she could regain too much of her self and then hit him.

"Sakura-chan, what are you doing out here sleeping?" he asked her seriously.

Incomprehension was painted on her face as she looked at him questioningly. And then suddenly she seemed very aware of what was going on around her. Her eyes widened and she sat up abruptly, turning her head this way and that, looking around frantically. Her gaze stopped on the road, and she blinked, her eyes wide and fearful; slowly she raised her fingertips to her lips and touched them gently. Her eyes filled with tears.

"Sasuke?" she whispered, seeming to forget Naruto, Hinata, and the silent Neji, "Sasuke?! SASUKE?!"

Her body began to visibly tremble, and she laced her fingers through her hair, holding her head with a look of shock and despair on her face before bursting into anguished sobs.

"Hey! Sakura-chan?!" Naruto sat down beside her and put a comforting arm around her, he was at a loss of what to do, "What did that bastard Sasuke do?"

"...Gone..." she managed to choke out between sobs before breaking down again into shuddering tears.

Naruto heard Neji mutter 'Byakuugan' to himself, staring down the path. Hinata meanwhile sat down on the other side of Sakura and was patting Sakura's shoulder calmly, making soothing hushing sounds. But both Naruto's and Hinata's efforts were in vain as Sakura didn't even seem to notice them. Looking up at Neji, Naruto expected the worst; the Hyuuga prodigy relaxed his vision and shook his head at Naruto and Hinata.

"If Sasuke left, it was some time ago," he said pensively, "Naruto, I believe we should abandon our mission for the time being and report to the Hokage what has transpired."

Naruto gave a slow nod, and both he and Hinata rose to their feet, supporting the grief-stricken Sakura. She had quieted down a bit and she was still audibly crying, but it wasn't as loud. Naruto could still feel her shaking as he had his arm supportively around her shoulders. He looked at her with a great despair in his chest.

"For Sasuke to leave again..." Neji started, and then he shook his head in quiet disgust.

Naruto's face turned from one of sadness to one of seething fury. He glared down the path where Neji was facing, a feeling of hurt and betrayal in his chest.

"Dammit, Sasuke," he growled menacingly to himself, "How dare you betray this village twice? How dare you leave Sakura-chan like this again?"

"What?!" Tsunade hollered, slamming her fists down on the surface of her desk, "He *what* ?!"

"Left Konoha," Neji replied calmly, crossing his arms, "Last night."

It was early in the morning, not even nine o'clock yet, and already there were problems arising. It couldn't have been more than twenty minutes ago that she sent Naruto off with the two Hyuuga cousins on a short mission that would only take a few days. She had only held off on sending Team Seven on that mission was because Sakura's brother would be returning today, and she figured that he would want to wish Sakura a happy birthday. The next mission she was going to be sending Team Seven on was going to be a long one. Maybe she should have sent them anyways, because maybe this could have been prevented.

"Hinata! Go round up Shikamaru, Chouji, Lee, Ten Ten, and Kiba," Tsunade ordered severely, snapping her head up, "Shizune, go get Kakashi, and Anko, and any other jounin that have had any contact with Sasuke!"

The two women let out a quick 'hai!' before running out of the room. Tsunade stood up and began pacing back and forth, just wanting to have a nice glass of sake, however, Shizune had found and hidden her last bottle. Her mind was racing. Right when she had thought that Sasuke was on their side for sure, he had gone and pulled a stunt like this. Had he been using them all from the beginning? What were his motives? There were too many questions left unanswered, but she could spend no time making investigations, her first priority was to prevent Sasuke from getting too far and betraying Konoha again.

Perhaps rounding up half their most reliable troops was a bit drastic, but after seeing how Sasuke fared in the Chuunin Exam, and the number of small missions that Team Seven had managed to pull off in the past few months, she was without a doubt certain that Sasuke would be able to give them all the slip. After all, Sakura had mentioned frequently in her periodic medical reports that Sasuke had

gotten by via the use of his 'chakra senses' when the Sharingan had taxed his vision too much in it's early stages of re-manifestation. She had described briefly its properties and how he could sense people coming from almost a kilometer away—literally.

Naruto tried to make a comment but Tsunade silenced him with a deadly look before he had barely gotten his mouth open. Neji just stood calmly, his arms crossed and his eyes closed. More scattered thoughts ran across Tsunade's head, like how she really could go for some sake right now, and how Sakura was taking things—if she even knew yet.

"How did you find out that Sasuke was gone?" she shot sharply at Neji.

It was Naruto who answered, "We found Sakura-chan unconscious on a bench as we were leaving the village."

"When we woke her, she began to cry out frantically for the Uchiha," Neji continued, opening his eyes, "When questioned further on the matter of Sasuke, she could only bring herself to utter the word 'gone'."

Just then the door burst open and both Shizune and Hinata tumbled in through the door, the crowd of Konoha's elite ninja not a step behind. In addition to Kakashi and Anko, Shizune had fetched Asuma and Kurenai—a wise choice Tsunade thought to herself. They had both seen how he had broken out of Kurenai's genjutsu. Shizune straightened up to attention and stood to the side, while Hinata timidly retook her place next to Naruto.

"What's going on?" Kakashi asked, tucking his favourite novel away out of sight.

Tsunade faced the group of them, her hands on her hips, "Apparently last night, Uchiha Sasuke departed from the Village Hidden in the Leaves."

There was a stunned silence among those who hadn't already known.

"What do you mean? He left?!" Anko demanded, a frustrated frown on her face.

"He attempted to leave the village secretly last night, but however encountered Haruno Sakura. What happened is unclear, but we know that Sakura was found unconscious this morning by Neji's group as they were leaving on a mission. The circumstances and the motives behind his leaving is unclear, however it is apparent to me that he is going to do something that we would not approve of, seeing as he tried to leave without us knowing," the Hokage explained impatiently, "Our first priority is to get him back, questions can be saved for later. Now, Shikamaru, of all the jounin, you are the most skilled in tactics. I want you to take this group and devise a way of retrieving Sasuke at all costs. You may use whatever resources you need to retri—"

"No."

There was a rustle as all the people in the room turned their eyes to speaker, and a number of eyebrows rose; in the entryway of Tsunade's office stood Sakura. The kunoichi stood weakly in the doorway, her hand resting on the doorknob, and her body was trembling visibly. It was obvious that she was distraught; her eyes were clouded, missing the usual sparkle that normally resided behind them, and tearstains were visible on her cheeks. Her skin was unhealthily pale, and as she took a step forward, it looked like she may faint.

"Sakura-chan!" Naruto exclaimed, breaking the silence, "I thought I left you at Sasuke's house to rest!"

Sakura ignored his concerned outburst and locked her gaze with the Hokage, her eyes moist, yet she refused to let the tears fall.

"Don't send anyone after Sasuke," she said, her voice unwavering, yet it was not difficult to see that she was doing everything in her power to keep it from trembling.

It had been silent before, but now the silence seemed even quieter, if that was even possible. Out of the corner of her eye, Tsunade saw that even Naruto was stunned speechless, which was an incredible feat within itself.

"Why not?" she said after a moment, some of the other occupants in the room turning and looking over at the Hokage.

"He's not betraying Konoha," Sakura stated, more in a factual way than an actual answer, "He has gone to kill Itachi...and he's going to come back."

"Sakura..." Tsunade said as kindly and patiently as she could, "I know that you have placed faith in Sasuke, but—"

"No," the pale, petal haired girl cut her off, "He will be coming back. Unless he—unless he...dies, he'll be back."

"Sakura-chan..." Naruto murmured quietly, a pained look on his own fox face.

"He knows that you will try to follow him... At his skill level, he won't let you find him if he doesn't want to be found," Sakura said faintly, "And if he wouldn't let me stop him, he won't let you find him."

Neji turned towards Tsunade, an unreadable expression on his face, "This is true. When we trained together, he had a better understanding of physical influence of a person on the environment through his enhanced senses. He knew how to move without disturbing his surroundings."

"He beat me many times when we were training for the Chuunin Exam," Kakashi commented, a troubled look on his face, rubbing his chin, "Each in a smaller time frame than the last. He would put up a

formidable fight, and I think it would take us all a considerable amount of time before we could even hope to subdue him."

"In addition, most of his Sharingan has returned to its formal strength," Lee said in a forlorn matter, "It would be very difficult to fight him if he chose to use it."

Tsunade sat wearily down at her desk, resting her fingertips together, "What a monster we've created."

"Sasuke may be very strong," Naruto muttered, his fists clenching, "but I say we still go after him, Tsunade-obaachan!"

"Naruto," Sakura turned her faded gaze to rest on the young exuberant chuunin, "Last time I asked you to bring him back for me; this time I ask you to leave him."

A tear escaped Sakura's eye and trailed down the side of her cheek, but a small smile was on her lips as she turned to face the Hokage who was sitting composedly behind her desk.

"Do you remember, Tsunade-sama, almost a year ago, just before Sasuke was first found?" she said quietly, "I said to you that he was a caring person, even if he didn't show it. And he *is* a caring person; and he'll be back. Trust in him—I do."

"We'll see Sakura," Tsunade said after a moment, "Thank you for your input—I'll take it into consideration. Everyone dismissed until further notice."

"Thank you," Sakura uttered quietly, before wobbling precariously, only to be caught by Naruto who had suddenly rushed forward to her side.

"Sakura-chan!"

"She's stressed, tired, and depressed," Tsunade said, rising to her feet, "Naruto, take her home to her parents' house—"

"No," Sakura murmured almost inaudibly; she sure seemed determined to interrupt the Hokage today, Tsunade noted with grim amusement, "I want to go to Sasuke's..."

"Why?"

"My things are there," came Sakura's reply, but Tsunade wasn't so sure if that was the real reason.

"Very well, Naruto, bring her to the Uchiha manor and make sure that she stays there, resting," Tsunade sat back down, and sighed, "Hinata, maybe you'd better go along."

"Y-yes."

The Hokage watched as Sakura put a supporting arm on Naruto's shoulder while Hinata, stood nervously to the side. After the three of them had left the room, Tsunade turned to Shikamaru.

"Do you think that we would be able to handle Sasuke if we needed to?" she asked wearily, afraid to hear the answer.

"It would be very troublesome," Shikamaru replied as the rest of the group had their eyes on the Nara genius.

"Very well, then, everyone dismissed until further notice," Tsunade said with a sigh, "I'll have to think this problem over."

Oh, how she just wanted some sake.

"Huh?" was the first thing Kanaye uttered when he returned to Konoha.

The three of them, him and his two teammates, Inuzuka Hana, and a buddy from the Nara clan, were back from a mission assigned to them a few weeks ago. It was still early in the morning, and while the other two were in a heated debate over whether or not dogs should

be allowed to be used while hunting—Inuzuka said that it was perfectly fine, while Nara said that it was cruel to frighten the deer like that—Kanaye was too tired to get involved.

He had just been away from home three weeks, and while he did this fairly often, there was something to be said about returning home and just resting. Not only that, but it had been his sister's birthday three days ago, and he had unfortunately been away. He wouldn't put it past Sakura to pull a teasing guilt trip on him, which worked better than she thought it did. But when Kanaye was planning his meeting with Sakura and what to get her for her eighteenth birthday, he wasn't prepared to meet her on the very path that he and his team were walking down.

"Sakura?" he wondered aloud, and the other two stopped bickering to look.

Sitting on a stone bench along the path was his sister. She was wrapped in a blanket, gazing out over the path, which they were wandering on, but she didn't react to seeing them, almost like she couldn't. Kanaye broke away from the group, jogging up to Sakura's stiff form. She glanced up at him as she seemed to notice him for the first time, and a smile came to her face. His worry increased tenfold, he knew that smile—it was the fake one, the one she always wore during those two dark years of depression.

"Sakura, what are you doing out here?" he asked her, surprise and concern coming to his face. What was she doing out here all alone? Usually she and the Emo Prince were always found together when they were not at some particular chore or task. If you handcuffed them together, they wouldn't notice the difference.

"Hello, Kanaye," Sakura said cheerfully; it was fake, all fake. This wasn't right, something was horribly, terribly wrong, "Isn't obvious what I'm doing here? I'm waiting."

It was a simple answer, and innocuous answer. To anyone who was merely acquainted with Sakura, it would sound normal—fine. There's

nothing the matter, would be the consensus; she was smiling, her tone cheerful. What could possibly be wrong? But Kanaye knew better.

"Sakura, what happened?" he asked her, kneeling down and grasping his sister's hands, "Why are you here so early in the morning? What are you waiting for? *Who* are you waiting for?"

She turned her gaze away from him and looked down the path again, her smile fading, "Sasuke."

It was like someone had broken something solid within Kanaye. Simply snapped it in two. Something he believed to be solid and wholesome and sturdy had just been broken like it was nothing. He was shocked, but he also realized the gravity of it instantly. His two teammates were lingering behind him, waiting for him; he turned to them now.

"Go on ahead and let the Hokage know we've completed the mission," he said over his shoulder to them, "I'll go sign the paperwork later, and she can mail me the cheque. I've got a family issue right now."

Unsure of what to say, the two of them just gave silent nod and then continued on without him, whispering softly to each other in mild disquiet. But they were already miles from Kanaye's brain. He got up from the ground and instead sat beside Sakura; the blanket had slipped from her shoulders a bit and now was hanging by the crooks of her elbows. He pulled the blanket back up over her.

"Where did Sasuke go? When did he leave? What did he do?" each question came to mind before the previous was even out of his mouth. He just didn't understand what was going on.

"He's coming back," she replied, answering none of the questions.

"Sakura!" he said sharply, "Look at me."

Reluctantly she turned her clouded viridian eyes to meet his royal blue ones; there was a deep pain behind them, a worry and sadness worse than her bout of depression a few months previous. Her face was blank, only focused on him because he asked, and he knew the moment he released her from his demands of answers, her attention would be gone from him instantly.

"Did anything happen while I was gone?" Kanaye asked directly and seriously, "Did Sasuke hurt you?"

"No."

"Are you pregnant?"

"No."

A wave of relief passed over him there, but he had been certain not to let it show. He continued in his bombardment of questions.

"Why did he leave?"

"Revenge is first and foremost the most important," she answered, it sound like she was quoting something, "He's gone to kill his brother."

She looked away then, back down the path, as if she was expecting to see somebody there, someone coming down the path towards her. It was obvious who she was hoping to see.

Kanaye let out a despairing sigh, and put a comforting arm around Sakura, pulling his sister close. "I am going to kill him," he muttered to himself.

"He's coming back," Sakura said again, she seemed to believe it too, just by the tone she said it in, "And when he does, please don't hurt him."

"How long have you been sitting here?" Kanaye asked her—he knew it was no good saying anything back about Sasuke in front of Sakura.

"Well, Naruto took me back to the Uchiha manor after he found me here unconscious this morning," Sakura answered slowly; Sakura couldn't lie when she was upset—she wouldn't give you a straight answer, usually, but she was truthful when she did, "But after they brought me home from the Hokage tower, I came back here again."

"You were found unconscious?!" Kanaye exclaimed.

"I tried to keep him from leaving last night," she murmured absently, "Tried and failed...but he'll be back."

"Sakura, you don't know he'll be back," Kanaye said as comfortingly as he could, "And if he does come back, it'll be a while before he actually does. I don't want you to stay out here."

"But..."

"What makes you so sure he'll be back?" he asked firmly.

"He promised me," she replied, "He promised me right before he kissed me."

"He kissed you?" Kanaye was dumbfounded. There was something about Uchiha Sasuke kissing his sister that did not compute.

Sakura nodded and smiled sadly, "And then he called me annoying."

"He kissed you and said you were annoying?" Kanaye repeated, but he didn't expect to hear a further explanation. He didn't get one. He pulled Sakura closer to him and he felt a tear fall into the fabric of his shirt. What was going on?

"I love him," she murmured, the tears beginning to flow, "I'm so afraid he'll die."

' If he comes back to Konoha, he'll die anyways,' Kanaye thought wryly to himself, 'because I'll kill him.'

"Come home, Sakura," he pleaded gently, "I will not have you sitting here for however long it takes Sasuke to kill his brother. I'll help you pack whatever you need and then we'll go home—"

"No," she said turning her eyes towards him, "I'll live at the Uchiha manor."

"Why, Sakura?" he asked exasperatedly.

"It shouldn't be a problem for anyone right now," Sakura said in a matter-of-fact way, lacking all the zeal and normal pep she possessed, "He's not there. You have nothing to worry about."

"Fine, fine," he agreed. Right now he just wanted her away from this bench, from there, he could work on managing to convince her to come back home, "Let's just go."

"Can we wait a little longer...?" Sakura trailed off as her eyes went back to the path.

"No, definitely not," he told her, standing up and pulling her to her feet; she swung dangerously and he had to grab her to keep her from falling, "Have you had anything to eat today?"

She shook her head from side to side. He groaned in his head in silent despair, "I'll make you something when we get there."

The two of them stood motionless for a second and then an idea came to mind. He picked his sister up effortlessly and stood her on the bench. He turned around and jabbed a thumb at his back.

"Hey, I'll carry you, okay?" he said in a gentle voice, "Like when we were kids."

He saw a small smile form on her face, but it faded quickly. At least it was something, he thought wryly to himself as he adjusted Sakura's weight on his back. He started to walk down the path, closer to the village, piggybacking a silent Sakura. For the moment this was the

best he could think of doing; he wondered if their parents even knew what was going on right now. Was his dad even home? An internal sigh.

"So what do you want to eat?" he asked her.

There was a pause, "...Something with tomatoes."

It was slow, agonizing suffering. Hours seemed like years, a day seemed like a thousand years. How long could she keep this up? How long could she bear this overwhelming feeling of pain? How long would Sasuke be gone? A week? A month? A year? This slow suffering—if a day seemed like a thousand years, how long would a year be? Could she live through this agony? Could she keep from withering away?

It had only been two days. Two days since he'd left. It was only the day before yesterday when Sakura's brother brought her to the Uchiha manor. He'd fixed her a tomato salad. Each bittersweet fruit was like a bittersweet reminder. It consoled her and tortured her. To be loved and abandoned? It was a tormenting feeling. There was no doubt in Sakura's mind that Sasuke loved her. It wasn't the kiss that said it to her, though it had confirmed it. Sasuke's need to seek out Itachi and kill him was evidence enough; Sasuke didn't want to lose *her*. There was no other way to convince him things would be all right; she knew he had left to protect her. And it stung like a million needles. And if he died? What then?

She lay petrified in his bed, curled up in blankets that smelled of him. She was frozen, timeless, empty. She was tired, so very tired, too exhausted to do anything, to move, to even think. She was beyond the point of sobbing—her strength was sapped. But she wasn't beyond the point of tears.

She just lay motionless; if she could have seen herself, she would have seen a frail looking woman, lying on the bed, a look of quiet shock painted on her pallid face. Her green eyes wide and staring,

but unfocused... Dirty hair, unkempt, around her face like a mauve curtain... She looked dead, lifeless; shallow breathing and a steady silent stream of tears were the only evidence she lived. Sakura wouldn't have recognized herself.

When had she last moved? It was a few hours ago. Had it only been that long? Really? She had eaten then, but she tasted none of it. It was mechanical, habitual; she ate because she had to, she needed food to live. It was a necessary function, nothing more. She'd be damned if she let herself starve to death. Sasuke would come back, and if he found her dead... She didn't want to think about it.

She was so useless. All this time they'd shared, all this time she'd gotten to know him in ways she had never known him before, she hadn't been able to change him. She hadn't been able to lessen the fear of his brother, hadn't been able to show him that they could defend themselves if that day ever came. But was that something she could change? Change Sasuke's desire to protect? Could she have done anything to stop this horrible nightmare from starting?

No. And that was why she felt useless.

There was a knock at the back door. Sakura's eyes slid into focus, she blinked; her fingers twitched; she felt so stiff. Aged—she felt aged, so many years beyond her eighteen. Surely she must be older now, it felt like two thousand years had passed. She stiffly rose from the bed, wiping her eyes habitually. Walking rigidly she made her way to the door. She was an old lady, lost in her agelessness; she expected whoever to be at the door to be as old as she was, frail and brittle. Or at least not to recognize her.

But no, Naruto looked the same as always on the other side of the door. He was young, and she was too, she realized, her hands before her were not old and gnarly. Both of them were normal, save for both wore gloomier expressions than usual.

"Naruto," she said, her voice empty, but it wasn't that of an old woman's.

"Sakura-chan," he said quietly. But she forgot what he said after that. She let him in and mechanically and animatedly she answered his questions. Yes she was eating right; no, she was doing fine; no, she didn't want to move back with her family; yes, she knew he thought that was best. What else they spoke of, she couldn't remember. Probably more of the same, more reassurances, more empty promises to take care of herself, to cheer up, whatever.

He left eventually, and then she made her way back to the bedroom, prepared to wait for another thousand years. But as she moved across the carpet, something happened. An accident, a mistake, a bout of carelessness—clumsiness. Her foot stepped on a corner of the blanket lying on the floor, and she stumbled, fell. She caught herself on the bed, but not before her arm hit the corner of the night table. The lamp fell over, and then on to the floor, and one of the two pictures on the table fell flat. There would be a bruise on her arm later. She didn't care.

It was a full three minutes before Sakura moved to pick herself up. Her eyes were clouded with tears and it was hard to see what she was doing as she picked up the lamp and steadied it on the table. The picture was next; she closed her fingers around the frame and lifted it so it was upright—she didn't take her hand away. Instead she stared transfixed at it, and then took it off the table and held it delicately in her hands.

It was the picture that she and Sasuke had taken together at the New Years Festival. The two of them standing close to one another, both garbed in their kimono they wore on that memorable day. Her eyes fell on herself standing there—her smile was radiant, her eyes green and bright; happiness spilled out of that expression, pure joy. Her eyes moved to Sasuke; his gaze looked slightly unfocused, because his vision wasn't completely perfect at the time, but his line of vision held true enough. A hinting of a smile was on his face, a shadow of its true form. Sakura knew how the features on his face would change if he were to pull it into a true smile. She could remember, too, what it felt like to have those lips on hers.

It was as she was staring at that picture, as the minutes that were hours seemed to tick on, that something clicked in her. It wasn't a sudden click; it was like locking a door slowly, turning the key slowly, slowly, slowly, and then inevitably the lock would click. The transition was almost undetectable, but the result was obvious immediately.

What was she doing? She wasn't doing anything. Nothing. She was doing the same as last time. Hadn't she constantly replayed in her head over and over what had happened the first time Sasuke left? Hadn't she continuously wished she could have gone back, replayed the moment, and done something differently? Changed it? It was no different this time—this time, she knew how things could go. This was her second chance, and she was letting it go to waste; she wasn't doing anything different.

If Sakura could have seen herself now, she would have seen the clouded unfocused eyes become clear, and harden. She would have seen the knuckles on her hands go white from clutching the picture frame. Determination was returning to her. Yes, Sasuke promised he was going to come back, but there was no guarantee; the only way she could make sure he came back was if he was brought back. But she was older now, stronger now. She wasn't going to rely on others. She had failed to stop him once already, but this time, she wasn't going to ask Naruto to attempt what she'd failed.

She would go after Sasuke herself. And she would bring him back—she would not fail this time.

Like Sasuke, she left in the dead of night, without telling anybody. They say that peoples' abilities are at their best when they're motivated, and Sakura had never been so motivated before in her life. Breaking into Tsunade's office had been easier than she thought, her drive pushing her to be extra careful with everything she did. She felt guilty about breaking into her shishou's office, but it was rewarding when she found the most recent updates on Akatsuki in the desk. Akatsuki was in the Land of Waves, and one of the

suspects was Itachi—there was no doubt that Sasuke on his way there.

She spent the next day preparing for her secret journey. He had three days gain on her, but with a journey that would take a week, she wasn't too worried. But she knew that three days was the maximum she could allow before she would have to leave herself. To Naruto and her family she told them that she wanted to be left alone for the next few days and she would emerge when she was ready. When they saw her, they sensed the change in her mood—though they didn't know what spurred it—and accepted after a little pushing.

How long would it be before they worried about her and checked on her? A few days? A week? A week would be fine—she would be long gone.

The only warning she left behind her was a note, in plain view on the tiny kitchen table, in her handwriting.

I'm bringing him back.

And then she was gone from the village, so silently that nobody even knew she was gone. There was no traces left behind; it was like she had disappeared into thin air.

A/N: See! Things aren't the same as last time! She's going after him! I'm still not wanted dead am I? D:

Chapter 69

A/N: Biggest Dilemma in this Chapter: What the hell do two people talk about when they're about to kill each other?! (If this were a Gintama episode, the episode would be titled that instead of what it's actually titled. :p)

Warning: Gore. That, and it's loooonnnnnnggg. (But not as long as the New Year's chapter.)

Chapter Sixty-Nine: Cruel Mercy

Konan pulled her head under the linen sheets when the first light of day made its way through the window, squinting her eyes shut and cursing the morning, wanting it away. There was only one way the light could have spilled in through the window so suddenly, and that was because Itachi had opened the curtains. They had both stayed up too late last night, and she knew she was going to pay for it this morning.

"You should get up," she heard Itachi's voice.

"I know," she muttered; she didn't want to have to think about what the day would bring. More walking up and down unexplored shore-lengths, searching for signs, hoping that maybe they would find the three-tails.

"The longer we remain here the more we are neglecting our responsibilities," he reminded her.

"I know that too," she answered, rolling over with a groan, braving the sunlit room, "What time is it?"

"A quarter past eight," Itachi was standing by the window, looking outside, the sunlight silhouetting his bare chest, aside from his boxers he wasn't wearing anything.

Konan groaned in response and buried her face in her pillow. Nariko was a morning person, and there was little doubt that she would be waking up and wondering where Konan was. Technically, she shouldn't even be away from Nariko's side, either she or Itachi should be watching the small girl at all times. She had only left the room when Nariko was soundly asleep, the daily treks up and down the beaches exhausting her. But regardless, Konan shouldn't have ended up staying the night. As it was, they were sleeping together much too often. And usually she was pretty good with not falling asleep afterwards, being able to head back to her room if need be, regardless of where she was. But not last night, obviously.

A finger traced the length of one of her legs that was exposed on the bed, and she jumped reflexively from the tickling sensation. She took her head from the pillow and looked at Itachi, who was straightening up, a hint of a smirk on his face. She kicked her foot at him in irritation, but he merely caught her by the ankle; in retaliation she tried to kick his hand off with her other foot, but he merely caught it with his other hand. He pulled her by her ankles, and dropped her feet when she'd reached the end of the bed, letting her legs dangle off the edge.

"You should get up," he told her again, his voice sounding amused.

"I think you're too eager to get up," she told him, sitting up and putting her arms around his neck; she lay back down, pulling him down with her, "Are you one of those people who is all work, and no play?"

"Siren," he said, but she only laughed.

"That means nothing as long as we're in this room," she grinned.

She kissed him passionately then, smirking against his lips. Even since she first spoke to him that night just over two weeks ago, it suddenly became easier to talk. They knew clearly the boundaries between work and what was forgotten—that had been in practice for years. So even though there was talking now, the two were still distinct. Maybe that was why it was easier to talk, or maybe it was because they were far away from Amegakure where their superiors had little control over what they said or did.

She pushed him away. "Okay, that's enough. I'm awake now," she said, and then slid out from underneath him, taking half the bedding with her, "I'll have a quick shower and then go check on Nariko. Pretenses are that I was asking you something early this morning, mmkay?"

He sat down on the edge of the bed, and gave her a nod, "It is your turn to take her along on the beach."

"I'm on baby-sitting duty today, I know," she said, standing up, letting the remainder of the bedding fall to the floor; she collected her stray clothing, "Where are we walking today?"

"Nariko and you will be walking the eastern side of the largest island today; it would probably be more proficient if you started from the north and worked your way south," he told her, his eyes following her around the room, "I will be searching the southern shores and the southeast peninsula."

"Biggest island today—fun," she said sarcastically, and then she straightened up, "Oh well, it's why we're here right? Though I seriously think that the Sanbi's moved on."

"I doubt that," Itachi answered, "Nariko found some stray chakra residue on the beach last week. According to the notes Orochimaru left behind, residual chakra from the Bijuu evaporates after a day and a half. It was recent."

"But shouldn't we have found more signs by now?" Konan pointed out, straightening up, her clothes all balled up in her hands.

"It probably feeds on the sea life—there would be few reasons for it to frequent the shore," Itachi answered simply.

"Nariko says she knows its out there," Konan mused, "She said she can just tell it's around here somewhere. She's kinda got an affectionate attachment towards it, you know? She sometimes refers to it as 'demon-buddy', have you noticed?"

Itachi nodded in reply. She knew there was likely something he wasn't sharing, but she couldn't blame him. Locked door or not, even she was keeping a tight lid on some things. She wasn't going to pry—curiosity aside, she simply didn't care. If Itachi wasn't to talk, he'd talk, and even then it wouldn't mean anything.

"Speaking of which, if Nariko comes knocking, I'm—"

"Not here," he finished for her.

"Right," she gave an approving smile.

Dismissing all thoughts she had in regard to what was going through Itachi's head, she went into the bathroom and locked the door. A locked room within a locked room; on a metaphorical level, she wondered what that could mean.

It had been two days since Sasuke arrived in the Land of Waves—and six days since Sakura had left Konohagakure unbeknownst to anyone. Sasuke had been in search of his brother for those past two days, having made little progress—he heard a lot about them from various fishermen, who said they had either met Itachi or a blue-haired woman who asked them about the presence of a monster that had been terrorizing the local fishing industry. But as for actually finding their precise location, Sasuke was having little luck.

He knew he didn't have much time left to find his brother. The longer he remained here, the sooner Konoha would be after him, and the more time Itachi had to find what he was looking for and leave. He wasn't as worried about the latter as he was the former. But he was also concerned about overstaying his welcome. When he arrived, he had headed towards the house of Tazuna the bridge builder from years ago, in hopes that the small family of three was still living there; luckily for Sasuke they were, and they remembered him well. They asked many questions his team and how things were back in Konoha. They obviously had no idea about his temporary absence from Konoha, and he wasn't going to mention it. But in their delight in seeing him again, they offered him a place to stay.

Right now, Sasuke was riding on a ferry to the island just north of the one Tazuna's family was living on. There was only one major port on the island, and Sasuke presumed that Itachi and his teammates would be staying in that town. It was easier to remain covert in largely populated areas. Additionally, most of the news that Sasuke had managed to gather had come from town as well. However, a key of news that he had managed to acquire yesterday had been most helpful. He had heard that the most sightings of them had been in the ports, and that they seemed to be seen in various places throughout the Land of Waves, searching for the monster. Today, Sasuke was going to try a different tactic. He was going to ask the various staff of different ferries if they had ferried anyone of Itachi's description anywhere that day.

Sasuke stood by the railing, resting his arms on it while waiting for the ferry to pull into port, listening to the lull of the ocean and the rush of the waves. The sharp scent of the sea salt was in the air, and the boat was rocking gently under his feet; sometimes there would be a cry from a sea bird. Even though Sasuke couldn't see it because of his blindfold, he could feel the warm spring sun shining on him. He didn't have his chakra senses activating, he saw with everything else. It was peaceful.

He felt the chakra signature of someone approaching him—it was a small signature, of the nature that he associated with non-shinobi. The person stopped next to him and when they spoke, Sasuke discovered it was the voice of an older man. Maybe sixty years old, on a guess.

"Excuse me, sir, but we will be docking soon," the man said with a polite air, "Would you like some assistance disembarking from our ferry?"

Ah yes, the inevitable comment about his sight. It had come to him by almost every single staff member on almost every ferry he had been on. He hadn't taken his blindfold off since he had fastened it tightly around his eyes in Konoha on the night he left; Tazuna the bridge builder's family had even asked about it, though like his answer to Tokugawa Manzo, he only said it had been lost in a struggle. A personal struggle, but nobody needed to know that other than those who already did.

"No, that won't be necessary," Sasuke said with patience, turning his head towards the man, "Though there is something I would like to ask."

"Please sir, anything to be of assistance," the man answered humbly.

"Does this ferry stop at more than one stop?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, it stops at two other islands before looping back through another channel and reaching the port we just came from," the man answered with what Sasuke presumed was accuracy, "If you require disembarkation at another port, I would be willing to assist you in making sure that you get off at the correct one."

Sasuke ignored the offer—it wasn't needed, he could see perfectly well even when blindfolded, "How many loops has this ferry made today?"

"It's gone around twice, sir," the man answered, a little taken by surprise at the question.

Sasuke didn't hesitate asking the next question, though it was unlikely he'd get a desirable answer: "I am presently looking for somebody. Have you seen a man traveling with a blue-haired woman, and a short girl of about sixteen or seventeen years of age? They may be wearing black cloaks emblazoned with red clouds."

The chances were unlikely but still possible. Sasuke knew he had to ask all the ferries before they left. It was his third day—he knew they were traveling around the islands, he knew they were here—*somebody* must have seen them.

"Why yes, sir, there was a trio fitting that description who boarded the first ferry this morning," the man answered, "I know which stop they got off at, too."

Bingo.

It didn't take Sasuke long to find Itachi. There were more people who had seen them at the small port where the ferry docked, though from what Sasuke gathered, the group had split up. People told him that they had seen a man of Itachi's description head southward, but they hadn't seen either of the two women with him. Sasuke wasn't sure whether his luck was just strong or if this was an obscure coincidence. Either way, after traveling for about half an hour south, Sasuke caught Itachi's chakra signature on the edge of his awareness. A signature he had burned into his memory from the last time he met his brother.

Ten minutes later, Sasuke saw Itachi on the beach, wandering by himself. Sasuke paused and perched on a branch in the trees, grasping a limb tightly. Anger burned within him, and the branch was beginning to give under his vice-like grip, but he made no move towards his brother. He was so furious that he could feel the curse mark dancing around in its seal—something he hadn't felt it do for a

while. But he knew that if he didn't calm himself, if he didn't think things through, and if he weren't acting rationally, he'd lose to Itachi.

He could die.

And he wasn't allowed to die. He had no intention of dying—he'd promised Sakura he'd come back, hadn't he? Fighting Itachi was dangerous, and he wasn't going to increase his chances of leaving Sakura entirely alone in the world by being a fool controlled by his anger when facing his brother. For the time being, he would work to calm himself—his target was no more than a hundred meters from him, it would be hard to lose sight of Itachi now.

He observed as Itachi moved down the beach, following the shoreline southwards, and Sasuke accordingly moved his position southwards as well. The elder Uchiha did very little other than walking on the beach, sometimes bending over to examine something, moving his hands along the sand. Sometimes he would cast wary glances towards the ocean, pausing for five or more minutes, like he was expecting something. Though Sasuke was not standing close to him, his senses relayed Itachi's movements like he was standing right next to his brother. The blindfold on his eyes was by no means a hindrance.

As he watched Itachi, he slowly forced himself to let go of his anger; it was like he had been holding sand in his fist, and slowly but surely it began to leak out. And eventually, it was also gone, there was not a grain left. The experience of letting go of his anger before facing the person he hated most left him feeling resolved, determined, and almost melancholy. At last he felt he was ready.

What was he going to use to goad his brother into fighting him? What were his tactics? He'd pondered this all the way to the Land of Waves, and finally, he decided he would take what would come, and make due with his surroundings as best he could. Extinguishing his senses for a moment to allow a last period of calm, he inhaled deeply, and then let it out in a final determined breath. His senses

became activated once more, and noiselessly he leapt down from the tree that was his perch and to the rocks below.

Silently he stole over the beach, his footsteps masked even to his own ears as he moved over the sands. He reached for his katana, and slowly drew it, making sure that it made no sound against the sheath. Step by step he inched closer to Itachi, the wind blowing noisily off the ocean from across the bay, shielding his presence. Clenched his jaw as he drew up behind Itachi and pointed the tip of his katana at the base of his brother's neck.

"You've grown careless," Sasuke said calmly, his voice devoid of emotion, "I didn't think that I'd be able to come up behind you so easily...Itachi."

Itachi was clearly startled; he had stopped still at the first utterance of words and was standing rigidly on the spot. His voice, however, betrayed no hint of being caught unaware like he had, "Sasuke... I am surprised that you did not kill me the instant you could. In fact, it still astonishes me that so far you still have not run me through."

"I'm not like you," Sasuke spat, his control on his anger wavering for an instant. He wasn't like Itachi—not one bit. He wasn't like his brother, who mercilessly killed men, women, and children, without warning, without letting them even know the reason they were going to die. He was merciful.

"Turn around. Slowly."

Itachi did what he was told, until he was facing his younger brother, he moved to hold his hands up to show he was not going to attack, but his sight had landed on Sasuke's blindfold. He dropped his hands, but didn't make any suspicious movements. Sasuke, however, was not about to drop his guard, he monitored his brother's hands with his senses carefully.

"Why are you here, Sasuke?" Itachi asked, his voice blank.

"I would have thought that that much would be obvious," Sasuke answered, his voice equally as blank, "I am here to exact my revenge upon you."

Itachi closed his eyes for a moment and then opened them again, the expression was hard, critical, "I have already told you that you are not worth my time any longer. You have lost that which gave you the slightest chance of winning against me. You still can have no hope of killing me."

"Yet who has the weapon pointed at his throat?" Sasuke answered, a hint of a growl present. His anger was not returning to him, not in a way that was damaging to him. No, he felt the energy from that anger fuel him, no anger was felt, only the desire to fight.

Itachi made no answer.

"Don't you think it strange that I managed to come up behind you without your noticing, when you see me here now, clearly without sight?" Sasuke continued when his brother failed to break the silence, "It has almost been a year, Itachi, since I lost my sight. I have learned many things in that time. And if you refuse to face me as an opponent now, I will be forced to plunge this katana through your throat."

Itachi was silent for a moment longer.

"Today it is my choice whether you live or die," Sasuke said with a note of finality, "Whether you intend to die or not, the decision is quite out of your hands."

Sasuke was done talking. It was all or nothing now—there was nothing left to be said. Nothing more needed to be said. He was quite clear. And it seemed that Itachi understood that as well.

"Very well," he answered stoically, "It would seem that I have no choice but to waste my time on someone so foolish as a brother like you."

Sasuke was not fool enough to put his katana away, as he and Itachi made their way inland to a clearing where they decided they would fight, but he was courteous enough to lower it and hold it by his side. He knew that Itachi was not interested in fighting him, something which made him angry, but he knew that Itachi had no choice, and Itachi was not one to run away. Murderer or not, Itachi was too proud to run away, especially when he thought his opponent was weaker than him, which he had clearly stated he did.

The clearing was open, roomy—there was a slight uphill slant in the northern direction, but aside from that, it was ideal for fighting. There weren't many rocks protruding out of the ground, and a thick layer of grass grew. Sasuke observed his surrounding on all sides with his senses, looking for advantages he could use against his brother. There were many places that could play to his advantage if he was careful. But his biggest advantage was already on his face, the blindfold that signified the blindness Itachi thought he still had, the blindfold that concealed his Sharingan, the blindfold that protected him from the Mangekyou Sharingan.

Sasuke faced his brother, shedding his raincoat and dropping it on the ground; Itachi, too, removed his cloak that showed his affiliation to Akatsuki and dropped it on the ground, before facing his younger brother in return. Both were ready to fight.

"Anything you would like to say?" Sasuke asked, his voice stony.

"You are making a mistake," Itachi answered.

Sasuke smirked, "I don't think so."

Those were the last words uttered before the fight began, those were the last words Sasuke uttered before launching himself at Itachi. The fight had begun—and all Sasuke knew was that he had to defeat Itachi, he had to win, he had to live, for Sakura's sake. And that was enough.

Katana pointing forwards, Sasuke charged it with his chidori; he could not see the electricity dancing up and down the blade with his senses, but he could feel the energy as it arched off the metal, the chirping still clearly heard. In front of him, his brother stood, stoically unmoving; slowly, he raised a hand, his index finger lifted, and then pointed it at Sasuke. Sasuke felt the chakra of the genjutsu brush over him, causing a slight sensation of interference on his senses, but because his eyes could not receive the attack, there were no other effects.

It almost took Itachi a second to realize that his genjutsu had not worked; the split-second longer it took him to realize that the attack had failed almost cost him dearly: Sasuke swung at him with the katana, and Itachi only just leapt out of the way, and the edge of the katana caught the hem of his shirt, shredding the edge a little. Sasuke smelled burned fabric. Yet from behind, Sasuke saw that his brother was not making any movements towards counter-attacking; he could not take Sasuke seriously, or so it seemed. Using the momentum from his charge, he whirled about and brought the charged katana about; Itachi's mid-air trajectory could not be changed, and Sasuke made a nice clean cut across his brother's upper arm—the charge causing temporary paralysis from the shoulder downwards.

Itachi landed on his feet, his one arm supporting the cut on his upper arm, blood clearly oozing from the wound. He looked genuinely surprised that Sasuke had landed a successful blow on him. Sasuke smirked at him, allowing his brother a chance to register this new information. Perhaps it was a little arrogant, allowing his brother time to recover, but Sasuke refused to fight him seriously until Itachi did the same.

Sasuke rested the tip of his katana on the ground, waiting for Itachi to react in some way, "It'll be several hours before you can move that arm," Sasuke told him calmly. Itachi was flexing the fingers in his left hand, but even though it was obvious he was trying, he couldn't lift it.

"One arm is more than enough to fight you," Itachi answered, his voice was cold—Sasuke took this as an indication that all niceties were over, "You shouldn't leave yourself open."

Itachi drew a kunai from a pouch fastened around his waist and came at Sasuke, taking advantage of Sasuke's clearly open position. Sasuke on the other hand had been expecting this, and quickly lifted the katana up from the ground again, preparing his counter attack. Itachi moved quickly, and Sasuke knew that without his Sharingan he would be unable to determine where Itachi would strike, but because of his knowledge of the Sharingan, he knew that he could create a distraction. Sasuke moved his katana in a manner that caught Itachi's eye—the way his katana was moving, he would end up stabbing Itachi in the neck while taking the kunai strike point blank. Itachi would be forced to block or dodge the strike if he didn't want to end up dead.

One arm rendered useless by his chidori, the smart move was to dodge entirely, and as expected, Itachi leapt out of the way. But this was a mere distraction—Sasuke's katana strike meant nothing; his true intent was to do something about Itachi's other hand. As Itachi dodged, Sasuke dashed in and grabbed Itachi's wrist. But years of ANBU experience and then years working with those as skilled as Akatsuki showed clearly—reflexively Itachi kicked out with one of his legs. Sasuke was then forced to drop the wrist in order to block the kick—and instead of blocking, he grabbed the ankle, pulling Itachi to the ground. No sooner had Sasuke dropped Itachi to the ground than he joined his brother on the grass as Itachi swept his feet out from under him.

Sasuke's concentration broke from surprise and the chidori in his katana went out, but he scarcely noticed, as he was already busy trying to get out of the way as Itachi struck forth with his kunai. A sharp pain shot through Sasuke's shoulder as the kunai dug across it, but it was only his right shoulder, and even though he had trained himself to be ambidextrous, Sasuke was still predominantly left-handed.

Sasuke rolled quickly so that he landed in a crouched and soon sprang out of the way as Itachi came in with another skillful kunai strike. Sasuke blocked it with his katana, and Itachi, realizing that it was no longer charged, made no move to avoid the metal-on-metal contact. It hurt to move his right arm too much, Sasuke observed while tentatively holding it out behind him for balance purposes, but he'd felt worse. And so, undeterred, he threw a counter-attack. But quite to his surprise, Itachi leapt back, and then back again, disappearing into the tree line. Sasuke frowned a puzzled frown to himself—was Itachi fleeing? No, he wasn't moving beyond the trees.

Sasuke stood stock still, and followed his brother's chakra signature as Itachi moved along the edge of the clearing. It seemed that Itachi figured that if close attacks weren't working on his blind brother, perhaps if he attacked from behind, he would have better luck. Playing along with his brother's assumption, he pretended to cock his head to the side, as if listening for Itachi. After a few seconds of silence, Itachi was almost directly behind him. By this time, Sasuke decided he had better react as if he thought Itachi had fled; he put on an angry tone of rage.

"Coward!" he roared furiously, "You damned *coward* !"

Itachi was closing in from behind, the wind in the trees and masking his movements well; Sasuke pretended he could not hear nor see his brother with his senses.

"You have no honor!" Sasuke raged on, "You are a disgrace to the *entire clan* ! You are too afraid to even fight a *blind* man—"

Itachi was two meters away from him, going at a swift run, charging headlong towards his brother, a kunai aimed to strike his left kidney from behind. Sasuke stood still, pretending until the very last second that he didn't know of Itachi's presence. A split-second before Itachi would strike, Sasuke stepped to the side and grabbed his brother's hand this time. Itachi's expression faded from one of seriousness to one of obvious shock; Sasuke spun around sweeping Itachi's foot

out from under him, and then twisting his brother's hand back. There was a distinct snap as the radius bone in Itachi's arm broke.

The expression on Itachi's face was one of suppressed pain; it was obvious that he was trying not to let his agony be displayed vocally. Still, despite the pain that he was in, Sasuke could only view his expression before Itachi uttered the word:

"Amaterasu."

Sasuke's eyes widened under his blindfold and he let go of Itachi's arm, leaping backwards across the field. One arm incapacitated, the other one broken, Sasuke knew that Itachi would be reduced to only fighting with his Sharingan, which wasn't all that useful aside from the Mangekyou. A normal state of Sharingan was good for only evading, and Sasuke was surprised that Itachi had reverted to the use of the Mangekyou so quickly. Amaterasu was dangerous for Sasuke—more than normal fire was—because Amaterasu was all-consuming.

Sasuke could feel the heat of the black flames following him as Itachi directed them with his Mangekyou Sharingan, and Sasuke had no way of seeing the flames, other than slight distortions in his senses and signs of the destroyed grass. He cleared his mind for a moment in contemplation—he had hoped he would be able to reveal his last trump card towards the end of the fight, but it seemed he had no choice now, not with the fire present. He reached up behind his head and loosened the knot in blindfold. The fabric slackened and then a puff of hot air blew it from his eyes—he let the blindfold float free, landing in the flames.

For the first time since Amaterasu had been unleashed, he could see how the destructive fire had altered the land. But the fires were not moving; the fires had come to a complete stop. From across the black embers he met his brother's eyes, and he saw more than just subtle astonishment there, he saw full-blown shock. Sasuke would have smirked if he was not so focused on remaining alive among the flames, if the heat hadn't been so sweltering, and if sweat was not

running over him, stiffness and soreness stemming from his shoulder wound. Itachi was looking at his supposedly blind brother, two Sharingan meeting one another for the first time in years—Itachi's Mangekyou meeting his normal one.

His Sharingan wasn't as strong as it had been—he still was missing one tomoe in the one eye. And only when he had three tomoe in each eye would he be able to begin to hone the potential power in his eyes. It was still too early to push it, and it was still risky to fight Itachi with his Sharingan at its current level. If Itachi used Tsukiyomi, he knew there was a high chance he couldn't get out of it. Only another Sharingan user could escape from Tsukiyomi, and he wasn't even at full strength. Maybe if he combined his experience from escaping from genjutsu with his Sharingan, he stood a small chance, but...

Sasuke closed his eyes—he'd seen the layout of the flames, they were still motionless because Itachi was still shocked. He would have to use his sight to avoid getting burned, but if he closed his eyes when he was near Itachi, he should be safe. Combining sight and senses was still impossible for him, but switching between them was simple.

He leapt into the air, flying over the flames that were stationary and launched himself towards Itachi, his eyes remaining shut; he'd charged his katana again, the chirping mingling with the roaring of the fire. He felt heat coming up behind him, and he knew that Itachi had recovered his shock, but there was nothing Sasuke could do but hope that he reached Itachi before the flames reached him. He was headed straight towards Itachi, his katana extended towards his brother's heart. If he made it, it would be over.

Itachi dodged—his movements were so quick that there was a distinctive lag in Sasuke's senses, leaving his awareness of Itachi's chakra signature being the only accurate way of determining his brother's location. Sasuke opened his eyes and looked at where Itachi had been, landing on the safe patch of grass. He whirled around and scanned the flames, watching as they danced again—

half of them had gone out, having been spent, but a dangerous amount still remained.

Sasuke was now faced with the difficult task of dodging the flames while keeping his back to his brother, while making sure his brother did not try and strike him from behind while his senses were deactivated. And like he had been worried about, Itachi's signature moved; Sasuke quickly whirled around, shutting his eyes, and activating his senses, countering the attack. Time dragged on as the two brothers continued to fight amongst the flames, Sasuke finding it harder and harder to dodge both his brother and the flames combined.

And then the dreaded happened. He had no choice, it had been that, or suffer a consuming burn. Sasuke had been once again charging towards Itachi, making another attempt to damage his brother beyond his paralyzed and broken arms. He had been so close to Itachi, when suddenly, Sasuke felt a heat closing in on him. Itachi was directing the flames in a pincher-like attack, and Sasuke had no way of seeing where they were coming from exactly. He wrenched his eyes open his eyes scanning frantically—a hand darted through the flames, seizing Sasuke by the throat. Red eyes leered up at him.

"Tsukiyomi."

Sasuke didn't have time to react, he didn't have time to move, or to even *think*. He felt the genjutsu settle on him like a layer of cold and he was there, he was in that place he saw in his nightmares, the endless red sky. All that was black was white, and all that was white was black. The lightless black moon, the red clouds that dragged across the crimson sky like blood-soaked rags. The black earth was soaked with blood, and the stench of death hung in the air. Across from him stood Itachi.

His brother looked angry, irritated, his lips moved, but Sasuke barely heard what he was saying. He was panicking—he had hoped to avoid this, he did not want to be subjected to the tortures of Tsukiyomi; he was desperately plotting a way out.

"This is as far as you go, foolish little brother," Itachi said, his voice frosty, "You have done better than I expected, in this fight and outside it. I never imagined your sight would return. But is better for me, even if you do not have the eyes that I have."

Sasuke wasn't listening, he was muttering to himself, over and over, the same word, willing it to come into being. He was putting as much strain on his Sharingan as he dared, he hoped it would be enough, he hoped he would not lose his sight a third time. His muttering grew louder, until it was coherent.

"Your foolish attempt to fight me will cost you," Itachi continued, not noticing that Sasuke wasn't paying attention to his words, "For the next seventy-two hours...."

"Kai...kai...kai...kai...kai..." Sasuke was saying to himself, trying desperately to see inside himself with his Sharingan, looking for a weakness in the flow of chakra, an anomaly, anything...

"You will witness the death of your teammates, over and over—"

"KAI!"

Despite the pain that Itachi felt shooting through his broken arm, he knew only the one bone had been broken. And as he had observed Sasuke's movements, he noted that he could not keep his eyes shut when Amaterasu was attacking him, for some reason or another. Taking advantage of his brother's habits, he moved the black flames so that Sasuke was trapped on two sides while launching himself towards Itachi. The instant that Sasuke opened his eyes, Itachi forced his broken arm to move; he grabbed Sasuke's throat, holding his brother in place as he stared Sasuke in the eye.

"Tsukiyomi," he muttered.

There was no escape for Sasuke now; and his brother's eyes became unfocused, dull, and distant. He'd used Amaterasu too long,

and combined with Tsukiyomi, he had exhausted his chakra. There was nothing left for him to use—not even his Sharingan—but that was fine, Sasuke would be unable to move once he released his brother from Tsukiyomi. Even now he felt his Sharingan fade away, leaving the world heavily blurred and dark. The normal form of the Sharingan had been like his corrective lenses, making his vision normal. But now with out it, his eyes were too damaged from overuse of the Mangekyou Sharingan to see properly.

Itachi dropped his hand from Sasuke's throat, letting the trapped body fall to the ground while he nursed his broken arm. Or at least that was how it was supposed to happen. Sasuke's slackened body was falling to the ashen ground, the knees buckling, falling. But then Itachi saw something black burst forth like a flood from Sasuke's neck as the spark return to his brother's eyes. Sasuke's right hand went to his neck as black marks flooded over his shoulder; that was all Itachi saw before Sasuke turned his fall into a roll, twisting his left hand about so that this katana came flying in—a katana suddenly charged with chidori.

It caught Itachi off guard; it had happened so quickly. How Sasuke had broken out of the Mangekyou Sharingan was something Itachi couldn't even guess before he felt the stab of Sasuke's katana through his body.

The stiff sea air blew over Nariko as she stood upon the rocks above the waves, staring out into the ocean. She inhaled the salty scent, as the cool air whipped through her hair, and caused her Akatsuki cloak to billow around her. She closed her eyes and listened to the crashing sound of the thunderous waves, the sound of the wind on the water, the cry of the sea birds. The ocean was a powerful entity, she could sense it within her. The power of the ocean was swelling and pulsing around her, like she was within its swirling waters, being carried as it willed.

There was something slumbering in that ocean. A potential danger—there was an untapped power that wasn't released, but it lay in

waiting. She could sense this negative power in the sea, somewhere in the black depths below; she knew it was down there somewhere.

She opened her eyes and looked at the white spay that was coming up near her. They were so close to the demon—the evidence and signs were the freshest yet, but that wasn't all. She could feel it so very close...but where...?

"Kit!" Flower-chan called from upwind, her voice far away.

Turning her head she looked at the blue-haired woman, hurrying up the rocky beach. She paused, the ocean's grip still grasping much of her attention. She could still hear the rush and gurgle of the water, the wind vocalizing in a turbulent symphony. The pull of the ocean was very compelling.

"Don't stand so close to the water!" Flower-chan insisted, "You could be swept out to sea!"

Nariko blinked slowly once, and then she turned, jumping lightly down from her rock and towards the beach.

"Okay," she said passively.

"Itachi would be worried if something happened to you," Flower-chan said, standing next to the small girl, a hand on her hip.

Nariko wasn't really listening—she was still staring at the sea. Within herself she felt the ocean's pull, like it had taken a hand and reached in her, pulling her slowly towards the water by her heart.

"We're so close," she murmured, staring out to the sea.

"Oh? What makes you say that?" Flower-chan asked.

"I can sense it," Nariko said slowly, realizing it at the same time she said it. It was true; she could sense the Sanbi.

"You can sense it? Where?" Flower-chan looked at the sea, startled.

"I don't know. I can't tell where, exactly. But I..." Nariko replied, her eyes glued to the mesmerizing surge of the water on the rocks, "...can feel it...out there."

Flower-chan held her gaze on the water for a bit, but then looked at Nariko, "Hey, are you okay? You sound kind of...distant."

Nariko smiled softly up at her, "Yeah, I'm okay. I just really love the ocean, Flower-chan. I...want to live by the ocean when I have my demon taken from me."

"The ocean can be dangerous," Flower-chan said in the same quiet voice, looking out at the water, "It's a powerful force of nature. Like thunder is."

"I don't like thunder," Nariko said.

"Really? Odd..." Flower-chan answered, "I love to watch lightning and hear thunder. I wish we had thunder more often in Amegakure."

The two of them stood there, watching the water flowing, pulsing. The deep pull on Nariko's heart was stronger than ever—the crash of the sea, the powerful movement. She wanted to hear the pulse and gush in her ears, she wanted to feel the water carry her, pull her, push her, throw her, toss her body about in its watery depths; just the feeling of tumbling endlessly, completely relaxed, no mastery of her own body, just the sea. The pull sunk even deeper; from her heart, it reached further until it brushed her very soul.

The demon within her flared up suddenly in reaction to that feeling. It was like a sharp burn—Nariko almost yelped out loud at the feeling. Immediately the magic of the ocean was gone, ruined by her demon.

"*Isonade!*" it hissed, its voice suddenly coming in her head, "*Foolish girl! It is Isonade's power that is slowly wrapping deadly tendrils around your soul, its barbed roots already hooking into your mind! Do not let it control you! Unless you want to be killed!*"

The spell was gone. She still felt the power, but it was different. The power of the ocean was the same, but she could sense the Three Tails' power more strongly now. It was trying to lure them in.

"Flower-chan! The demon! It's trying to pull us into the sea!" Nariko exclaimed in alarm.

Flower-chan's gaze was still fixed on the sea, a vacant look on her face. but slowly, she blinked, gave a half-smile and shook her head, turning away.

"It can try all it wants, but I learned to control everything I thought a long time ago," Flower-chan said in a somber voice, "All it's accomplishing by trying to grab at me is reminding me of a time when I thought true happiness existed."

Nariko paused, and looked at Flower-chan with a slightly tilted head. A time when true happiness existed? There was a distant and sad look behind the older woman's eyes when she said that. Nariko didn't understand.

The waves rumbled loudly and Nariko felt her demon stir in discomfort. The free demon was moving closer, and she could tell her demon felt nervous by being restricted by a human host.

"It's coming," Flower-chan and Nariko whispered at the same time.

There was a rumbling sort of sound, and Nariko could see huge ripples forming in the water—and there were bubbles. Spray started to rain on them as the waves grew bigger, slapping down hard on the gravelly shore. Flower-chan's eyes had hardened and Nariko observed her stoic face with wonder, unable to fathom how she wasn't frightened in the presence of this awesome chakra.

Nariko could feel the demon's power strongly now—it knew they were there, and it was coming for them. The hair on the back of Nariko's neck was standing on end from the power that was charged in the air. Was this what it would be like if her demon was freed too?

Nariko sensed a pulse of chakra come from Flower-chan as well, but it was nowhere near as powerful as the demon's; she didn't understand why she had done that.

"Wait for it..." Flower-chan said in a low murmur, her face changing to one of anticipation, "Damn it, Itachi, you'd better show soon. I can't fight this thing for long myself."

Nariko snapped her head towards the ocean again as a loud splash rose up out of the ripples' center. It was the strangest creature Nariko had ever seen, and the biggest living thing she had ever laid eyes on. It was larger than some of the buildings in Amegakure, and as wide as a hill. It had a multitude of spikes and shell covering its large body, barnacles and bits of seaweed clinging to its large shell-like back. Below the shell there were two bits of spiky exoskeleton, between which could be seen something that resembled a face. Red cornea and yellow mucus-coloured irises stared out from the shadow of the shell, and Nariko felt herself tremble. Three large tail-like extensions rose out of the water and swished over its body, water flying every which way.

Flower-chan's firm mouth turned into a reluctant-looking smirk, "I guess there's no helping it—damn. Itachi, you'd better hurry."

"You're going to fight it?" Nariko gasped, tearing her eyes away from the demon only long enough to give Flower-chan an incredulous look, "But it's so powerful! Can't you tell how much—"

"Nariko," Flower-chan said quietly, "Stay back, okay? I don't want you getting hurt."

"But it's dangerous!" Nariko insisted, her eyes widening in worry. Flower-chan couldn't be serious about fighting this thing. Her own demon was nervous just at its presence, and Flower-chan was going to fight it by herself?!

"Kit," Flower-chan said calmly, "I'll be fine."

And without letting Nariko getting in another word, she took off running across the water, her cloak billowing out behind her.

Konan wasn't sure how she landed herself in this mess. It was her type of luck she supposed, to be the one who found the demon, when she was stuck with babysitting duty no less. It was supposed to be Itachi who found it first—it made more sense if it was. He would be able to fight this thing better than she would. She was mostly backup, she knew. The vast majority of her jutsu revolved around her paper ninjutsu, and then there was her rudimentary healing ninjutsu, and her small collection of genjutsu, which she had only learned as a security measure against Pain.

Water was probably her greatest disadvantage here. Her paper would get wet, shredded, she'd be unable to do anything, and she would get killed. But only if it got to that point—it was hard to fly with wet wings, but it was only when she was completely soaked through that she wouldn't be able to fly anymore. The point of weakness was obviously its eyes, once it was blinded, it would be a simple matter of dodging its flailing limbs and continue to inflict damage on it until it was defeated. Tch, easier said than done. For one, how was her paper supposed to damage that hard exoskeleton?

She saw the yellow eyes follow her as she ran across the water; they were sizing her up. And then quite suddenly, one of the tail-like extensions came down towards her. She had been expecting as much, and nimbly she leapt out of the way; she spread her wings and soared up into the air before the waves could splash her wet, effectively making her useless before the fight even started. Another tail came in for a swipe and she took a nosedive towards the face to avoid it. It saw her coming, and quite suddenly the two bits of exoskeleton clamped together over the face like a clam. The third tail came in from below. It couldn't see her right then, so its aim was poor, but already she was cursing.

If it was going to fight her, it would have to open its face up eventually to see her, and she knew that it couldn't hit her when it

couldn't spot her. She flew and dove between the flying tails, now obviously moving in a practiced pattern that covered all airspaces. It was difficult, so flying low to the water, careful not to get wet, she darted underneath the waving tentacle-like tails. She was close, another fifty meters, and she could get behind its head to—

The clam-like visor opened up and the eye caught sight of her instantly. Swearing she braked hard as the three tails splashed down on the position she would have been half a second later. Spray rose high into the air, and a few drops caught her, but not enough to make a difference. Again she fought through the tails, getting closer this time. She reached into her cloak pockets and pulled out numerous explosive tags; with a quick application of her chakra she caused them to fold up into little cranes, and she sent them flying on their own. Directing them with half her mind, she moved to stay clear of the tails, which was difficult, especially since she wanted to position the explosive tags perfectly.

There was a soft spot of vulnerable underbelly exposed just below the large shell, and above its head. Three of her cranes were headed there, while three others were aimed at the bases of its tails, and another two were to come into its face from the side. The first ones for the soft underbelly made it first, and they exploded with a loud crashing noise. The demon roared in pain and it flailed suddenly; large splashes of water were being sent up into the air as it started to flail. The tails in the air were flying about madly, and the roar was almost deafening.

Suddenly it went into a maddened frenzy; the eyes were glaring intently at the little fly that was Konan, which had somehow injured it so badly. She should have waited until Itachi came, she thought, trying very hard to keep her head as the dodging the tails became harder. She knew that if she got caught it would be over. Why wasn't Itachi here by now? He would have definitely sensed her pulse of chakra—and he was fast too. He was an Uchiha; he had a long history of anal Uchiha manners stuck into his brain, like be punctual for everything, along with never blow your nose in public. The fact

that he was delayed by this long meant that something had to be wrong.

She dodged to the side as one of the tails came in for a jab right at her. It was close—she could see every little barnacle that flew past; she could have reached out and touched the tail if she had been daring enough. What she hadn't anticipated was that the tail would snap back towards her from behind, like a whip. It collided with her from behind and sent her flying through the air. Her wings collapsed under the mere velocity she was traveling, she had no control over herself.

The ocean was cold where Konan landed, and it soaked her right to the very skin. Her paper became deadweight on her. Reflexively from years of practice, she let her chakra control on the paper drop, the soaked sheets of paper peeling away from her like huge flakes. A whole layer of her skin was paper, and even that had to go. Her Akatsuki cloak was shed too—extra weight when it was wet, something she couldn't afford to carry with her now. Especially not here. She wasn't safe in the water—she was now in even more danger than before. She pulled herself to the surface quickly, feeling some unseen extension of the demon's body churning the waters beneath her.

On the surface she hauled herself on top of the water like she was pulling herself out of a swimming pool. She had lots of chakra left over, but all her paper, even her paper rose, was gone. All she had left was kunai, shuriken, and throwing needles. Even her explosive tags were useless—the gunpowder in them was wet. But she didn't have much time to think. The demon had spotted her again, and was now flying at her with a tail; she felt the water beneath her feet pulse as something was coming in from below. It was a pincher attack; applying as much chakra as she could into her feet, she pushed off from the water, the mere amount of chakra causing the water to splash and hiss.

A bright light descended from the heavens, a loud thunder rumbled through the air, coming right down on the demon, another powerful

chakra signature flared in a dangerous way. Konan shielded her eyes from the brightness of the lightning right in front of her, but not before she saw the Sanbi convulse and twitch, a loud cry tearing through its throat. She could feel the heat and energy pouring out of the electricity, and her hair stood on end. The sound was so loud at such short range that she felt her ears go partially deaf. It would pass, she knew, especially if she tried healing them, but for now she could only hope she didn't hit the water before the discharge was done. As it was, she was lucky she hadn't been standing on the water when the thunder struck.

And then the discharge ended, and the demon's wails were all that was left to be heard. Konan hit the water again, but this time she managed to pull herself to the surface quickly. Her mind was confused, her heart racing. But there was only one person who could have used that lightning against the demon, and that was the frightened little girl who stood on the beach, watching.

When Nariko saw Flower-chan get hit by the Sanbi's tail, she panicked. The whole time she had been watching, she had felt anxiety throughout her body, and she could feel the demon in her mirroring that anxiety, except it possessed it for a different reason. Flower-chan hadn't re-emerged from the water right away, and when that had happened, Nariko felt something strange build up in her. It was a familiar feeling, a feeling of terror, fright and the need to protect. The first time she had felt it was many years ago, back in her village, when those people had come and yelled at her, and the flashes of lightning that had killed them danced over the ground in reaction to her fear.

She felt that way when she could not see Flower-chan in the water, and it had started to build up inside her, and she was unable to quell it. And then she had seen Flower-chan crawl out of the water, and stand proud once again, her cloak and beautiful white wings gone. But the Sanbi was quick in retaliation, and when it went to smash her again with its tail, she screamed out to Flower-chan as loudly as she

could. The power built inside Nariko couldn't be controlled; it couldn't be suppressed any longer. The demon let lightning descend upon the creature in the water, hitting it with everything it could muster from within Nariko's small body.

The demon was roaring now, in pain, but Nariko could only stare in horror. A horrible thought had come to her the moment she lost the hold on the power built up inside her. What if she had hit Flower-chan too? She started to shake, and tears started to form in her eyes. Flower-chan was... Had Flower-chan been...? Because of her? The demon roared and flailed in the water, Nariko's own demon smug about the damage it had caused its nemesis. The roaring turned into a howling, and then it began to descend into the water again, the water splashing this way and that as it hid down beneath the waves. For a horrified moment, Nariko was afraid that it was coming to get her on the shore, but then she felt it moving away, she felt it fleeing.

Nariko could only stare out at the turbulent waves that remained in its wake. Flower-chan was... No, wait. Was that...? Yes! There was something out on the sea, someone standing on top of the water as the waves settled. Nariko almost cried from relief, but she knew she couldn't feel relieved yet—Flower-chan might be injured. She was panting, her hands resting on her knees as she tried to remain standing. Even though she was standing far out on the water, Nariko could tell she was staring at her on the beach, and could see the look Flower-chan had on her face as she stared at her from across the water. Nariko looked sharply away; her hands were shaking at her sides, as were her knees. It was like it had been all those years ago; a time she could hardly remember. She had used her demon's power against the Three-Tailed Demon, and she shouldn't have.

There was a splashing of footsteps of Flower-chan's footfalls on the water, and then the crunch of gravel on the beach. Nariko could see Flower-chan's feet when she came to a stop in front of her, but she was too afraid to look at Flower-chan's face. She didn't dare.

"Kit," Flower-chan's voice was quiet, but serious, "Look at me."

Slowly, Nariko raised her eyes to meet those of the woman standing before her. She was dripping wet, her clothes soaked—torn in some places—her hair clinging to the sides of her face, her bun falling apart. Her eyes were hard, but not angry, but Nariko was still scared. What would Flower-chan say? It was the same lightning that had made everyone in her town hate her. Would Flower-chan hate her too? Would she tell Itachi?

"When did you learn to use that power?" Flower-chan asked.

Nariko didn't dare refuse to answer, "I d-didn't mean to... I...I've used it...o-once before. Only once, I p-promise! And that was b-before I was locked away in my old town!"

Flower-chan was quiet for a moment. "I see," she said, and then she put a wet hand gently on Nariko's head, "I suppose I should thank you, Kit. Even though that almost killed me too, you probably saved my life, whether you meant to or not."

Nariko could have collapsed in relief, "I did?"

Flower-chan nodded slowly, "If I had continued much longer on my own, I could have been killed. I was lucky you were with me, and not with Itachi—"

Flower-chan broke off in the middle of her sentence. A look of shock came to her face.

"What's wrong, Flower-chan?"

"Itachi! Oh gods, I forgot about Itachi! Something must have happened to him!" the older woman gasped, a hand coming to her mouth.

"What?" Nariko felt alarm seize her, "Something's happened to Itachi-niisama? How do you know?"

"Kit, Itachi and I have been working together in Akatsuki for nine years," Flower-chan answered, "He would have sensed the demon as well as you or I, and he would have responded to my call right away. The fact that he hasn't come can only mean something was stopping him from making it. And it takes a lot to stop Uchiha Itachi."

Nariko felt frozen. Had something happened to Itachi? In all the excitement and fear she'd forgotten about him, but now she was scared out of her mind. She couldn't guess what would have happened to him. What in the Land of Waves could stop him, save for the demon itself? She couldn't think.

"Come on, Kit, I'll carry you," Flower-chan pointed to her back, "I'm wet, I know, but it's the fastest way. I just hope he's okay."

"Me too," Nariko whispered.

The fight was over. Stillness engulfed the small clearing—the winds and fires had died, nothing moved; only Itachi's irregular breathing, which was labored from injury and pain, broke the silence. Sasuke stood over his brother, his katana still in hand, blood dripping off of its tip, landing on a surviving patch of new spring grass—a gruesome contrast of colours.

Sasuke was breathing heavily, his hand still on his neck, where a determined burning sensation was appearing. The permanent seal placed upon his curse mark...it had broken. He was in a slight shock from that, but the old seal that Kakashi had placed on him still remained, and while the permanent seal was damaged beyond use, he willed the old one to return. It would contain the curse seal, he knew that, as long as he willed it to do so. He closed his eyes and relaxed his body, forcing himself to be calm. The curse mark was contained for now—he could get it dealt with back in Konoha. For now—he opened his eyes—he had to focus on who lay before him.

Itachi was immobile on the grass. Sasuke's final blow to Itachi's chest hadn't hit his heart—he had only put the tip through Itachi's

shoulder. The chidori, far from fully being charged, had shocked Itachi's body, rendering him temporarily paralyzed. Splayed out on the ground, his one arm broken, scattered cuts and wound upon him, he truly was a pitiful sight.

"Go ahead, Sasuke," Itachi goaded him quietly, the blood tricking down from his mouth, choking his words, "Kill me."

A quiet murmur of wind rippled through the trees, like a muttering of dark bewilderment, as Sasuke sheathed his bloodied katana, approaching his brother's crippled form. He bent down and seized the front of his robes, pulling his brother upwards and slightly off the ground. He glared daggers at his brother's onyx eyes—eyes too exhausted to even activate the most basic stage of the Sharingan.

"No."

Itachi's eyes stared at him in shock, but Sasuke ignored his brother's expression, letting go of the folds of his robes, allowing him to fall to the earth. The large gash in his shoulder was bleeding severely but it was not enough to kill him, Sasuke had made sure it wouldn't.

"Despite everything you have done, amid all the hell you have put me through," Sasuke spat at his brother's feet, "You are still my brother, and no matter how much I want to see you dead, I have learned that there is still a drop of unconditional love that stays my hand."

Despite the fact that he was injured and dying, a smirk crossed his brother's face—though the expression was pained. Itachi closed his eyes briefly before looking up at the sky, a sky that had clouded over and was gray with evening.

"Then you are weak, Sasuke," he spoke hoarsely, blood flecking his lips as he spoke, "You are too weak to kill me."

"No," Sasuke sneered down at his brother in return, "It is you who are weak, *niisan*."

Itachi said nothing to this but took the opportunity to cough up a bit of the blood that had run down the back of his throat. His gaze shifted towards Sasuke.

"You told me that you let me live because I had the potential to be able to put up a good fight with you, to perhaps even kill you," Sasuke spoke softly, but dangerously, standing over his brother, "But you left me alive not only so that I could grow to become a formidable rival, but so that I could and *would* kill you—kill you so that you could finally escape the guilt that haunted you for the crime you committed. You lie here, on the ground, in the pathetic state you are in, feeling guilty—even now. Your eyes are asking me—begging me—to kill you, to allow you to escape the guilt that has plagued you. You chose me so that the clan would be avenged, and that would bring some justice and peace to your wretched soul."

The anger Sasuke had suppressed and let go before the fight now came back, but came back as a different form of anger. It came back as loathing, as disgust.

"But I won't kill you, niisan," Sasuke continued, his voice dripping with antipathy, "I'll not fulfill your request to die. I'll let you live, and let the terrible memories of what you have done, haunt you."

"What of the clan, Sasuke?" his brother's voice was factual, sensible; he was trying to manipulate him, but it did not work—with Sasuke's sharp hearing, he could sense the tinge of fear, "You would leave them unavenged?"

"You are a fool, Itachi, to think that I would leave you unpunished for your crimes," Sasuke smirked in a sadistic fashion.

He took from his pouch a kunai—the one that had his father's name engraved into it, the one that had been sitting there since he had taken it from Sakura's hands in the room where his parents had died—and held it up to Itachi to see.

"This...this is familiar to you, isn't it, niisan?" he whispered quietly to his brother, his sadistic smirk broadened.

"What are you going to do?" Itachi asked, his eyes narrowing, but it could not mask the nervousness that glinted behind his dark irises.

"First, I will rid your right hand of fingers, and then with this kunai...I will blind you," Sasuke stated calmly, clutching the kunai tightly in his hand, "You will then walk the earth as a despicable being, weak without your jutsu, helpless without your sight. You cannot distract yourself with quests for power, as you will be powerless; and there will be no worldly beauties to catch your eye, as blackness will constantly afflict you, allowing scenes of your crime play before your eyes, over and over. It will be worse than experiencing Mangekyou Sharingan; and what will make it worse for you, is to know that the person who despised you and loathed you the most, was the one who spared your life."

He took a step towards his brother's form, dead silence blanketing the clearing, broken only by Itachi's ragged breathing. His Sharingan eyes glinted dangerously as he leaned over his brother, putting the kunai at his side.

"Then go ahead and hate me, go ahead and despise me," Sasuke taunted quietly, "You'll be trying to run from your crimes, and surviving against your will—living in a much more despicable way than I ever did. But it will all amount to nothing, because you can never hope to kill me, even if you wanted to."

He then performed the hand signs—ox, rabbit, monkey—then focused the chakra, concentrating it in his left hand until it became visible to the eye; it crackled and sparked in random directions, the twittering of a thousand birds filling the air. Grabbing his brother's right hand by the wrist, he held it in his hand, raising it so that it were above Itachi's head. Itachi winced at the broken bone, but Sasuke only ignored him. Once the Chidori was glowing fully in his hand, he raised it upwards, the glow reflecting in Itachi's fearful eyes. He reached over with the Chidori, and grabbed the fingers of his

brother's hand through the sparkling chakra. A painful scream immediately filled the area as the twittering of birds slowly faded away. He dropped his brother's wrist and reached for the kunai at his side, as Itachi held his fingerless hand close to his abdomen, the fingers of his left hand making vague clutching gestures as he whimpered in pain.

"It pains me to do this, niisan," Sasuke stated emotionlessly, "but you deserve no better—I will not have you harming anyone I hold dear ever again."

With a foot pinning his brother's shoulder to the grass, Sasuke bent low over his Itachi's body. Reaching forwards with his hand he made to touch his brother's head, and a sadistic smirk passed over his face when he saw him flinch. However, Sasuke did not do anything but simply tap Itachi's forehead with his middle and index fingers. The chakra left his hand, and patiently Sasuke waited until Itachi's eyes widened in horror. Sasuke's smirk widened; he had put a genjutsu on his brother, a partial genjutsu—one he had learned by accident when training with Sakura. Itachi was hearing an illusion—there was now a song playing in his brother's head: the lullaby that their mother had written for her eldest son. And Sasuke knew that it would continue to play on forever until the genjutsu had been broken.

"Kaa-san," Itachi muttered so quietly that Sasuke had almost missed it, "That song..."

Sasuke nodded at his brother, confirming the answer to the unfinished statement. "And one day, when you crawl pitifully to my home, and lie dying on my doorstep," he whispered so quietly that only Itachi could catch his words, "it shall be your dirge."

The last words hung heavily about the two brothers. There was a deadly pause before Sasuke raised his father's engraved kunai and plunged it into his brother's eye.

The last image that Itachi saw was the expressionless face of his younger brother, the Sharingan eyes glinting blood red—eyes that flickered not with hatred, but with pity. And it was not the scenes of the murders that Itachi had committed, but instead it was that last image of his younger brother that haunted him to his grave.

A/N: It used to bother me how in fanfics Sasuke almost always kills Itachi. There are some very *well written* stories out there where Itachi dies, but I didn't want that to be the case with Blind, too. It took me a while to devise a way of having a unique outcome. And this is why this story is rated teen—very gory and twisted outcome.

That last scene, where Sasuke blinds Itachi, was written on February 13, 2007. (The day before Valentines Day, now that I think of it. Hmmm, creepy.) And then a little more than a year later, we find out, yes Sasuke does love Itachi deep down! Of course it was too late when he found out the truth and Itachi was already dead, but at least his regret proves it! The only thing I was wrong about was that I didn't think Sasuke had it in him to kill Itachi. But Itachi kinda let himself die, Sasuke didn't kill him directly. I still believe that if it had come down to it, that if Sasuke had to pull the trigger himself—in a manner of speaking—he wouldn't have been able to do it.

Anyways, enough rambling—you can't tell me that you just read through that entire chapter and have nothing to say about it! For the first time in a while, I'm asking you to review please! I want to know what you thought of my version of "revenge". I think this is my favourite chapter. (I'm a twisted creature. :D)

Chapter 70

A/N: Um, I confused some people, I think... Itachi isn't dead. When I said that last image of Sasuke haunts him until his grave, I meant for the rest of his life up until the day where he dies (because everyone eventually does).

Chapter Seventy: A Fool's Death

There were times to laugh, and there were times to cry. That was the basic structure of life, wasn't it? One laughs, one cries, and then, inevitably, one dies. Was he going to die? It certainly felt like it; pain that scoured through him was at a degree he could hardly comprehend as agony anymore. His eye sockets were on fire, the cut on his left arm stung, the wound through his shoulder throbbed and his broken arm felt like a raw ache.

Cold—he felt cold. Numbness...darkness... The lullaby his mother used to sing for him played endlessly in his head, the only sound he heard in the silent night. Sound would be his new sight now; he was blind. A world without sight—he knew that blindness was a fate that was inevitable for him; at the rate he used his Mangekyou Sharingan, it would come for him sooner rather than later. But never had he dreamed that it would come to him like this.

Nor death.

Sasuke had taken his sight, and then left. His brother had done something before he'd gone though—there was something burning near him, he could hear the crackle of the flames. A beacon perhaps? So that maybe someone would find his dead cold body? Or maybe perchance a fisherman would find him and get help. Itachi didn't understand Sasuke's reasoning, and yet he did. It was clear

that Sasuke wanted him to live, but it seemed he didn't care if he died.

Itachi didn't care either. Death would be preferable to this.

Everything seemed so much clearer. When his sight was taken, the pressing feeling in his mind had suddenly disappeared. The constriction he felt when he thought was instantly gone, and now his head seemed so much clearer, he felt like he had so much room to think. And as Itachi lay there, feeling like he was dying, he felt his life flash before his eyes—or rather, because he had the time, and because of the gravity of the situation, he reviewed his life, wondering many of the things that people wonder when they lie dying.

Sasuke had been right, he realized, he had wanted his brother to kill him. He had wanted atonement for his crimes of killing the clan, an action he had always regretted. That was why he didn't care if he died now. And suddenly it seemed obvious—he knew he had regretted killing the clan, but the regret seemed more prominent than before. Why was that? Why had he killed the clan...? To stop the coup—that was right, there was going to be a coup; he hadn't thought of it in ages. He hadn't forgotten, but it felt like he suddenly remembered.

More thoughts flitted through his head. He had joined Akatsuki to relay information back to the Village Council, to keep Konoha in the loop of Akatsuki's activities—he had never done that. They knew nothing of Akatsuki, he had never given them word of anything—he was a traitor in the Councilors' eyes now. He had been for many years. He hadn't even realized. And he had *known* why he was joining Akatsuki—why had he neglected those orders?

He remembered meeting Madara after everyone was dead, he remembered looking at his mentor and telling him that the task was complete... He remembered distinctly the Sharingan looming out from behind the mask... The Sharingan, that was it. He had looked at Madara's Sharingan, had looked him in the eye. How could he not

have been submitted to the control of a Sharingan in the hands of someone as experienced as Madara? Madara's host's Sharingan was weak—but wasn't it Zetsu who had once said that an expert with a stone could easily defeat a novice with a shuriken? Madara...that pressing feeling he had always felt—it was Madara's control on him, suppressing his thoughts with a Sharingan technique, keeping him where he wanted him.

Itachi lamented as the song played on and on. All those years wasted—wrongdoing, killing, terror; he had been a part of it all. Regret washed over him now—his brother, his dear little brother: a brother he'd put through so much pain, put through so much sorrow, all to protect him. Yet in the end Itachi had fallen to Madara's devices, and somehow, Sasuke ended up protecting himself.

Madara had wanted Sasuke for his Sharingan, he wanted the stronger of the Uchiha brothers to take the other's eyes and gain control of the permanent Mangekyou Sharingan. That brother would become Uchiha Madara's new host, and he would once again lead an attack against Konoha. Itachi remembered now, but this was the first time he had realized it so clearly. Yet Sasuke had managed to put himself out of harms way by losing his vision. And when his sight returned, he came and destroyed the sight of his brother, unknowingly protecting himself again from Madara.

Madara did not know that Sasuke had his sight, and even if he had, the brother whose eyes Sasuke needed to take had just been rendered sightless. Sasuke had destroyed what would have made him stronger still, in time. Irony.

But Madara's hold was gone now, gone the instant Sasuke blinded him, the connection between Sharingan's broken. There was no connection between them any longer, and he was free to realize his actions. It was also ironic that what Sasuke had meant to trap him in, had set Itachi free.

Sasuke...Sasuke didn't know the truth though. Sasuke was ignorant of Uchiha Madara's plans. But so long as Madara thought Sasuke

blind, Itachi knew his younger brother would be safe.

The lullaby played another round in his head, and it brought to mind the years long passed, the years left unthought-of. He remembered his mother's kind face, her gentle voice as she sang him to sleep. His mother hadn't been part of the coup, not like his father had been—she had known of its existence, but she hadn't been involved. In essence, she like so many others, was an innocent. He could clearly remember the look of her face when he slashed his kunai across her throat. He could remember her disbelieving eyes, her mouth an 'o' of surprise. The expression had changed as she died—slitting a throat never killed instantly.

His father had always been so proud of him, praising him. He had thought his eldest son the pride of the Uchiha clan, a son that hopefully would lead them to glory in the upcoming coup. The expression on his father's face also loomed in Itachi's mind, as he had seen his fallen wife, a wife slaughtered by their own son. Uchiha Fugaku had been quick to join Uchiha Mikoto on the floor, never rising again.

Regret and grief churned in him, stirred further by the repetitive circling of the lullaby in his mind. He was so sorry...he was so very sorry. Maybe if he died here, whatever governing force existed would allow him to apologize to his parents before he suffered his eternal punishment. He wanted to see them again, if only to apologize to them.

He felt a different sort of darkness begin to creep on the edge of his mind—he was losing consciousness. His mind briefly drifted to Konan and wondered if she would find him. What would her reaction be? Would she find him dead? Something twisted uncomfortably in his gut when he imagined her writing to Pain the circumstances and callously leaving the Land of Waves.

No, he thought to himself, she wouldn't—she would try to hide it, but something...something would cause her to stay. It was a Lie between them, that's what she had said, a false relationship built on

lies. But was it really? No. He felt in him an attachment towards Konan that he hadn't previously known existed. He cared for beyond the attractions of her body—if his thoughts were suppressed, it would have been easy to think he cared nothing for her. But what had attracted him towards her in the first place? An affection that had been suppressed, an affection that had grown in the corners of his mind without his knowing. And now, he could see it so clearly.

But it would be too late, he thought hazily as he slowly faded out of consciousness, scraps of thoughts remaining before he passed out entirely. It would be too late to tell her the truth he had discovered in the middle of their Lie.

The air that evening was damp. A fog had rolled in over the strait between the islands that the ferry took to return to port. It was the last ferry of the evening, and Sasuke wrapped the Akatsuki cloak at little tight around him to ward off the cool, wet feeling in the air. He hated the damp.

His rain cloak had been destroyed by Amaterasu, along with his blindfold. His eyes were wide open now as he leaned on the railing, watching how the fading light filtered through the white mist hanging low over the water.

Covered in blood and smelling of smoke, he stood away from other people, and positioned himself where he did not think others would wander. Sasuke didn't want any trouble, that was why he had taken his brother's cloak—which had survived by lying a safe distance away from where Amaterasu had scorched. It was clean, and after dressing the wound in his shoulder, and treating his scorched skin, he pulled it on to hide the splatters of blood.

He would leave the Land of Waves at the first light of morning, he decided. The condition in which he was in currently would only bring trouble to the kind family, and it would probably be best if he snuck into the room given to him and remove his belongings, not staying the night. Harboring a man covered in blood usually makes the

neighbours talk, and he didn't want that for Tazuna the bridge builder's family.

It was decided, he thought firmly—the ferry rumbled into a dock, water gushing and bubbling below—he would spend the night outside, and leave with the coming dawn.

It was the black smoke that rose in thick black billows, twisting up off the land and over the inland sea, which led Nariko and Konan to Itachi. A deep seeded feeling of alarm and concern had started growing, and the instant Konan had seen the black smoke, she knew something was horribly, terribly wrong. Itachi was strong—he was in Akatsuki, after all, an organization that accepted only the strong—but the fact that Itachi had needed to stand his ground to fight was alarming. Konan could only guess who had come and attacked him, but even those made little sense—nobody knew they were here, they had not disturbed the locals, in fact, every time they had asked about the demon, they had made sure to emphasize that they were removing it.

But somewhere, somehow, trouble had shown up and was giving Itachi a hard time. Konan just hoped that she would arrive in time to give Itachi a hand if he needed it, or arrive in time to find Itachi just finishing his opponent off. Glancing towards the west, she noted that the sun was already behind the islands, and the sky was growing darker—already in the shadows of the island they were on, she was finding it difficult to see in the dimming light. She and Nariko would arrive at the source of the smoke by the time twilight struck; it would be faster if she flew, she could probably arrive in a few minutes, not being deterred by terrain, but she'd lost all her paper in the water when she fought the Sanbi. At this rate, it would be dark by the time they arrived; and she had nothing to light her way with—the matches in her shuriken holster were definitely soaked through.

Which meant they had to hurry as quickly as they could, despite their disadvantages, despite their hindrances. Konan tried running a bit faster, putting some chakra into her legs to strengthen them.

"Ne, Flower-chan, what's that smoke?" Nariko asked quietly.

"I can guess, Kit, but I don't think you want to know," Konan answered.

She was afraid to say because she was afraid she might be right.

The smoke had gotten thinner as time wore on, and in about an hour, Konan finally closed in on the source. The moon was a half-moon, and provided a decent enough light in the darkness, despite the smoke shrouding half the island. A well-traveled path led her part of the way there, and then after warning Nariko to keep her head tucked low so she did not lose an eye to tree branches, she cut through the woods. After a fifteen-minute walk through the dark, firelight caught her eye—it was small, but it was something. Itachi may be injured and unable to move, she thought to herself, as she crept through the remains of charred trees, maybe he had lit a fire to help her find him.

She came upon the edge of a clearing, but she did not find what she had expected to see. There were no scattered bodies of defeated opponents, no campfire with Itachi huddled next to it, applying pressure to some wound. No, instead, she saw Itachi's body lying flat on the ground, a torch planted next to him, burning away. It must have been planted a while back, it had burned down a few inches and a blackened nub was protruding through the flames. But even in the feeble light of the torch, combined with that of the moonlight, she could see clearly the state that Itachi was in.

His eyes were put out, his arm at a slightly off angle and bluish-black bruising forming around the area of injury, a deep stab-wound through his shoulder, a cut on his upper left arm. There was blood everywhere—it was pooled beneath Itachi and scattered across bits of burnt and intact ground. His Akatsuki cloak was nowhere to be seen, though she cared very little about that. She stood in shock for a moment, and while she stood rooted to the spot, Nariko slid off her back.

"Flower-chan why'd we stop?" Nariko asked, stepping out from behind her, "I—"

Konan put her hand in front of Nariko to keep her from drawing nearer. This was something Nariko didn't need to see, but there was no way to shield her. Inevitably, the girl's eyes traveled to where Konan was hoping she would not look; Nariko stood frozen as Konan had.

"Stay here," Konan murmured, and then in sweeping strides she approached Itachi's body, but Nariko didn't listen—she followed in Konan's wake.

She approached the body of Uchiha Itachi with a rising feeling of despair, a feeling she could not find the source of. But as she came closer she saw that there was sign of life—Itachi was taking slow, shallow breaths. From a stride, Konan broke into a run practically throwing herself on the ground next to Itachi, she noticed that his right hand had been badly burned, and all the fingers, even the thumb, were gone. A trail of burned skin ran down the back of his hand—it looked like the ring he had been wearing had melted. Taking his face in her hands, carefully checking for signs of a broken neck, calling his name.

"Itachi...Itachi..." she found no signs of a broken neck; she turned his head towards her, surveying the damage done to his face, "Itachi if you can hear me, say something."

From the swirling depths of the darkness where he lay, Itachi heard the distant call of his name, woven in with a melody playing in his head. The more he rose to consciousness, the clearer the voice and the music became. Even though he was more or less conscious, a different darkness still existed, as did the aches and pains in his body. He recognized his name, he heard it being repeated to him... Somebody was moving his head—there were hands on his face. That voice, he knew that voice, too...

A croaked utterance came from his mouth, "...K-Konan...?"

"Oh, thank the heavens!" he heard Konan exclaim, but it was by no means a cry of relief. He heard the rustling of fabric, voice changed sides, "I thought you were dead!"

Slender hands took his right arm in them, poking and prodding along the length of his arm, examining it closely. From the other side, he heard the rushing of footfalls, he knew those sloppy-sounding footsteps too, just like he had known Konan's voice.

"Itachi-niisama!" Nariko yelled, sounding like she had come crashing down beside him, "Flower-chan, he's hurt badly!"

Nariko. Oh, Nariko... No, no... Memories of his time spent with Nariko also came back with an acute clarity. Every moment he felt concern, or worry, or sympathy, he remembered clearer now. Every moment she had caused him to smile, or to question his position in Akatsuki, he knew the reason why now. Every time he had felt affection towards her, or whenever he was reminded of Sasuke through her actions, he felt it again. And he felt regret and misery come to him again.

Nariko had labeled him her older brother of her own free will. But it wasn't until now that he realized he regarded her as a younger sister in return. A sister he had lied to, and deceived. A sister he had given false hope to. A sister he was going to help kill.

A sharp pain shot through his right arm, and before he could contain himself, an agonized shout escaped his lungs. Konan had just set the bone in his right arm, the one that Sasuke had broken during their fight. He clenched his jaw to help tolerate the fresh throbbing that existed there.

"Sorry," Konan said, sounding guilty, and then he felt something wet press on the stab-wound through his shoulder, which burned, "All my bandages are soaked with ocean water, so I'm as good as pouring

salt onto the open wound. Nariko, go find a stick that is as straight as you can find it."

"W-why—?" Nariko started, but Konan cut her off.

"We don't have time to ask questions, just do as I say," Konan answered snappishly, and then her voice softened, "Kit, if you want to help Itachi as much as I do, then please, do what I tell you."

There was a mute pause from Nariko, and then she got up and ran off towards the edge of the clearing. Itachi assumed she must have nodded, but he didn't think much of it. Experimentally, he flexed the fingers in his left hand—he still had mobility there; he tried lifting his left arm... Like Sasuke had said, motion returned in a few hours; aside from the cut in his upper arm that had delivered the paralyzing blow, nothing hurt.

"What happened to you?" Konan whispered as she moved her wet cloth on his face, but she only cleaned the area around the eyes, keeping the salted moisture away from the wounds, "Who did this to you?"

"Sasuke—my brother—hunted me down," Itachi uttered huskily in return, feeling regret down to his very core, he didn't blame Sasuke—he had brought this on himself, "He had come to take his revenge on me."

"*He* did this to you?!" Konan exclaimed incredulously, "I thought he wanted to kill you! Not blind you and leave you in a clearing barely alive!"

"So did I," Itachi answered, and he felt his consciousness fading again.

"Stay with me," Konan instructed, and Itachi felt chakra flow into him in the form of healing chakra, but it instead jolted his consciousness, he felt more awake.

"I will try," Itachi promised vaguely.

"Itachi, you should know that my medical skills suck," Konan said suddenly, her voice sounding suddenly worried, "I get to look at people's medical files, I get to decide whether or not Nariko is fit enough to have the Rokubi taken from her, but I only know basic first-aid healing ninjutsu."

She said this as her hands moved over his face, the healing chakra beginning to flow—it eased the pain he felt where his eyes should be, but he could barely feel any healing process taking place. Even with Konan's healing chakra, he'd already lost a lot of blood—maybe if Konan had arrived a little bit earlier, she would have been able to do more for him. But he already felt like he was dying.

"How did you end up losing this badly?" Konan breathed after a pause had spread out; in the distance, Itachi thought he could hear Nariko moving throughout the underbrush.

"Sasuke broke out of Tsukiyomi almost instantly," Itachi answered quietly, "I was standing right next to him when it happened; he managed to stab me with his katana, when it was charged with chidori. A chidori that is not meant to kill, but to stun."

"I thought it was impossible to break out of a genjutsu as strong as Tsukiyomi," Konan said, sounding confused; she turned her attention to his hand. More stinging as she wrapped it up in more damp bandages. Itachi tried not to flinch.

"I apologize that I could not prevent myself from becoming horribly disfigured," was all he answered instead, his voice weak. He avoided answering the question—he knew exactly how Sasuke had broken out of Tsukiyomi, but he hadn't anticipated it, and it had cost him.

"Don't say stuff like that!" Konan snapped back, her voice sounding upset. Itachi was a little surprised by the tone of her voice, "I'm not in the mood for black humor, not when your life is on the line."

"How did your bandages get wet?" he asked after a moment of grim silence, just to break the tension there, "I know you found the demon, but—"

"The Sanbi actually rose up out of the ocean—it attacked Nariko and me," Konan replied, her voice was still disproving, but she answered honestly enough; she tied the wet cloths tightly to his hand, "It kinda ended badly—I ended up in the ocean. Nariko saved me, by accident. She freaked out that I was losing so badly that she zapped the thing with her demon's power. Almost got me too."

Itachi let this information register—he had felt her chakra pulse, but he didn't know that they had actually ended up fighting it. And Nariko using her demon's power... His heart sunk—all his suspicions of Nariko knowing her fate, it made the guilt worse to think that she was staying with Akatsuki despite knowing what would happen to her.

The footsteps of Nariko returned, "This was the best one I could find, Flower-chan."

Nariko's voice was laced with concern. Itachi could imagine her worried face—her eyes would not meet anyone's, she would be nibbling on her lower lip, and fidgeting a little with her hands.

"Thanks, Kit," Konan answered as some sort of exchange was made. Itachi heard a tearing sort of noise from Konan's side and soon he felt pain as his right arm was jarred again. Konan was splinting his arm with the stick that Nariko had brought her. Nariko was kneeling next to him—he was only guessing she was kneeling, she could be cross-legged for all he knew.

"Itachi-niisama?" Nariko said tentatively, her voice trembling audibly, "Are you...a-are you going to die?"

Neither Itachi nor Konan said anything. He could feel her basic healing techniques working slowly on him, she'd bandaged the wound on his shoulder with wet bandages, and she'd splinted his arm, and wrapped up the remains of his right hand. But he was still

weakened, his body was probably shocked from the trauma it had received, and if he didn't make it to a hospital or medical facility of sorts within the next hour, chances were that, yes, he would die.

Konan knew it too. She was doing her best to stabilize him, but he knew thoughts were running through her head on what she could do. She could not carry him to get care within the amount of time he had, nor could she go and get help and return in time. She could fly over in no time, but the returning help would be much slower. And there was Nariko to take into account, though Itachi did not care if Nariko decided to run away. If she did—and he almost hoped she would—she would get a chance to receive a better fate than the one that was awaiting her.

It was Konan who broke the silence. "Kit, Itachi's been hurt very, very badly. And yes, it is very likely that...that he will die."

Her voice was bitter, and she spoke like she was only begrudgingly admitting it to herself. Itachi himself knew he was as good as dead the instant Sasuke left him here alone, and Sasuke had been right—he had been hoping that his younger brother would kill him. But now...he wasn't so sure if he wanted to die. He could warn Nariko about her fate, he could return to Sasuke and warn him about Uchiha Madara. Maybe he could tell Konan about how he knew that his attraction towards her was not only physical, that deep down, he had found a feeling he felt towards her. But now, he didn't seem to have a chance, he was going to die. And as for the last point—there was no point in telling Konan if he was going to pass away. It would be harder on her if she knew.

There was a long pause from Nariko. And then a soft shuddering inhalation. "Then I will save him—I'll save you, Itachi-niisan," she whispered.

"Oh, Kit, that's wonderful that you want to do that," Konan started, her voice sounding saddened, "But I don't think you can save him any more than I can."

There was another pause from Nariko, but when she spoke her voice was even, and Itachi could picture a sad smile on her face, "My demon can save Itachi-niisan—his injuries are easy for it to heal. I will give my demon to Itachi-niisan, and it will save him."

"I don't think you can do that, Kit," Konan's voice was trying to be gentle, but it sounded to Itachi like even Konan may be on the verge of tears, "I don't think it's possible..."

"It's possible," Nariko said with certainty, "And I will save him."

Nariko wasn't entirely sure how it was possible, but she felt a nagging suspicion in the back of her mind that it was. Also the fact that the demon had become suddenly agitated when the first thoughts of saving Itachi's life occurred was also a strong indication. Nariko looked at Flower-chan's face, a face that looked at her like she felt sorry for her. But Nariko ignored the look, she had known for a long time that she was going to die by losing her demon, but she would rather give it to Itachi than lose her life to the leader.

Closing her eyes she looked into her memories, trying to find the source of the nagging suspicion she was feeling; the demon was hiding something from her, and she was determined to find out. Because she was the host, and the seal was placed on the demon, that meant that she was in charge, and for the most part, the demon could not do anything to her physically unless she allowed it. That hadn't stopped it from tormenting her psychologically, but even then she still had more control over her own mind than it did. She prodded around in her memories, throwing her mind back as far as she could to that time when she was still in the village.

Most of her memories consisted of the dark room, but she had to go back further than that—she had a feeling that she had not been born with the demon inside her, and she wanted to find the time when she had received it. She remembered the incident in the village where she had accidentally killed those boys with the demon's power; she had to go farther back still. It couldn't have been much time before

that, she was so young when that incident had happened. Just a little farther—

She hit a wall. Or that's what it seemed like. Instead her mind was feeling blocked by a sort of force, preventing her from accessing those memories. She felt the demon's determination in her stomach, holding her thought process at bay, keeping her from accessing her memories further. In her mind's eye, it was like a wall of chakra stood in front of her, keeping her from descending further into the depths of her mind. The demon seemed a bit relieved in addition to smug, but Nariko stood before the wall pondering it. Focusing, she tried to breach it, and instantly she felt her consciousness jerked downwards, downwards, downwards.

There was a splash and she landed in the ice-cold water in the shadow of the cliff. The demon's eyes glared down at her from behind the haphazard bars, looking at her with scorn. Angrily, Nariko picked herself up from the water, shivering from cold, glaring back at the demon. She took half a step back, to be on the safe side, knowing that here was when she was most vulnerable to the demon.

"Give it to me," she demanded clenching her fists at her side—for the first time that she could remember, she felt angry, "Give me my memories back."

"You are trying to break our deal—you promised you would free me, and instead you are trying to deposit me into a man who is half-dead!" the demon snarled angrily.

Thunder clashed angrily above in response to the demon's anger, the water rippling slightly from the chakra that exuded from its prison. Nariko only set her jaw, clenching her fists tighter still.

"I'm not breaking it—I'm freeing you from me. I'm letting you go, but I didn't say where. I'm letting you go into Itachi-niisan," Nariko answered, and then shouted, "Now give them back."

The six-tailed weasel hissed loudly behind the bars, "Then come and take them!"

Nariko forced her soul away from the plain of water and back to the tunnels of her mind, trying with furious determination to break past the demon's wall. Itachi was dying, and she couldn't let the demon block her out—it was up to her to save Itachi's life, and if she was going to do so, she had to take control. This was her body, was it not? Wasn't the demon living in *her* ? Wasn't it relying on her to stay alive? If she died, it died with her, unless she let it go. It owed her those memories.

And then something occurred to Nariko. Her memories of the time where she received the demon may be blocked off, but the demon itself should have some recollection of the time it was put into her. She took another approach—she twisted her focus about so that all of a sudden she was piercing into the demon's mind and memory. A twinge of shock came from the demon, and it tried to conceal its memories, but she had penetrated too much—she had control over it; she was the host, the demon would bow to her.

"Kit, are you alright?" Flower-chan asked, her voice sounding far away, but the concern was audible.

"What's happening?" came Itachi's voice, also sounding far away.

Nariko didn't want to lose control—it was a power struggle between her and the demon and if she slipped, she knew she wouldn't be able to regain the hold she had now. She raised a hand up to Flower-chan, indicating that she wanted her to wait. It took everything she could muster to remain in control while speaking out loud.

"I'm going to use the demon's memories," she said slowly, concentrating hard, "to learn how to save Itachi-niisan."

It was very vivid—once she had found the correct memory, it was like she had cracked open a floodgate. It washed over her and

played before her like she was there now. She was in a small dim room—no, that wasn't right. She wasn't actually in the room, she saw the room, she reminded herself; the memory was simply that vivid.

There were six people in the room—there was an old man, two younger men, and a woman with a small child in her arms, and herself. No, not herself, the host through whom the demon's memories were being seen through. The child in the woman's arms, Nariko recognized instantly—it was her, the new host. It was strange seeing herself through the eyes of another, but she studied herself curiously. She looked barely old enough to walk, and her big curious eyes were looking at the different people while she sucked on her tiny fist.

The woman who held her didn't look like her mother—she seemed too old, she was a lot older than Flower-chan, but not quite as old as the old man. Said old man was stooped over and painting something on the ground; it was a circle, and within that circle was painted a six-pointed star. While the old man did this, he was reading instructions aloud from a book he was holding.

"A six pointed hexagram etched within a circle," he was saying in a professional sort of manner, "A representation of good and evil, a joining of the upper and lower worlds. The child and the demon will become one—the purity of a child's soul counter-balanced with the evil of the demon she will receive. The circle unifies these two entities."

The old man straightened up. He motioned towards the woman who held the infant Nariko, and the woman marched forwards into the circle. She put the small Nariko down in the center, who merely looked up at her curiously, still sucking on her fist. Next the old man indicated towards the man through whose eyes Nariko was seeing these memories. The two men on either side grabbed the arms of the host and dragged him forwards. The old man took out a knife and cut the tip of the index finger, blood beading up.

" Blood of the old host given to the new," the old man said, taking the hand of the host and painting markings on Nariko's face. The infant giggled, and dropped her hand from her mouth, "A blood pact that secures the crossing of the evil spirit."

The old man then painted markings on the back of the small girl's hands. And then he placed the host's hands on Nariko's tiny chest. The two men holding the arms of the host stepped out of the circle, as did the old man. Bending at the edge of the circle, the old man placed his hands on the mark of the circle.

" Chakra from the observing spiritualist," the old man said, and there was a deadly pause in the room. The old man finished off, "A cage of sacrifice builds upon the soul a funeral pyre. Black burden in the pocket of one's heart. A chain between the life force and the collar of the beast. A channel has been formed: bind, seal, connect!"

Nariko's eyes snapped open, the demon's memories followed with those of intense pain. She pushed her mind as far away from the demon's as she could, sitting on the ground panting slightly; she could feel her hands shaking.

"I know what to do," she said to Flower-chan who was looking at her in what looked like cold surprise, "Flower-chan. You need to draw a large six-pointed hexagram inside a circle."

Flower-chan blinked, looking like she didn't know what to say. She was about to rise to her feet, but when Itachi started speaking, she paused. Itachi reached up with his left hand—his good hand, and found Nariko's slight wrist, taking hold of it gently, but as firmly as he could.

"Nariko, no..." Itachi said weakly, holding her wrist securely, "If you try to...save me, you'll die... If the demon leaves your body—"

"I know," Nariko said softly, taking her wrist from Itachi's hand and holding it with both of hers instead. She held his hand tenderly, a great sadness welling up inside her. Everything was true—she'd

known it, but she had hoped to avoid telling him that she knew the truth. She didn't want them to know that all along she'd known that she was going to die. But now that he was telling her, she didn't see how she could keep it from them any longer. Her answer earned a pause from both Itachi and Flower-chan. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Flower-chan close her eyes and sigh in a despairing manner.

"For how long?" Itachi asked, his voice a hoarse whisper.

"A long time," Nariko answered, "If my demon is taken from my body, it'll kill me."

Another pause, "...Why did you not run?"

Nariko smiled sadly, though Itachi was not able to see it, "Because you were the first one to show me kindness."

Itachi opened his mouth to say something, but Nariko didn't want to hear anymore. It was making it harder on her the more he spoke—she didn't doubt wanting to save his life by giving up her own, but to see the grim expression on his face when she answered, made her upset. She didn't want her death to pain Itachi.

"I want to save your life, Itachi-niisan, even if it means giving up my own," she placed Itachi's hand by his side, letting it go; she turned to Flower-chan, "Please, Flower-chan, can you make the hexagram?"

Flower-chan looked questioningly at Itachi, but there was no voiced objection. "Itachi? Are you okay with this?" she asked, her voice holding none of its usual confidence, "Itachi?"

There was no response. Alarmed, Flower-chan bent over him, putting her head on his chest, and then put her fingers on his neck. Nariko was confused about what had just happened; she caught Flower-chan's gaze.

"He's fallen unconscious," she said in response to Nariko's questioning look, "But he's lost a lot of blood. If we don't work soon, he will die. ...Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Yes, I'm certain," Nariko answered, with a slowly nod, not breaking her gaze from Flower-chan's sharp eyes.

"But you know that we were lying to you, then," was the answer—it seemed like the older woman couldn't comprehend Nariko's idea, "You knew that we would kill you by taking your demon, but you still want to save him?"

"Yes," Nariko said quietly, "I was so happy with you and Itachi-niisan, and even if I was going to die, I could at least enjoy the care and acceptance I received. I didn't want to die though. I thought that if I could prevent the demon being taken from me, I could spend a longer time with you both. You couldn't take my demon before because I was weak in body—I thought if I made my body weak, maybe I could live a little longer."

"Oh gods," Flower-chan whispered, staring at Nariko with abject horror, "Your broken legs, and falling out the window, that was—?"

Nariko didn't want to answer, she looked away, "Later I decided that it would be better if we all ran away from Amegakure, but now this has happened. I would gladly give my life to save Itachi-niisan, because he's my brother, right? I just want Flower-chan and Itachi-niisan to live happily."

Flower-chan remained silent for a moment longer, and then rose to her feet, "I'll go make the hexagram."

Nariko nodded. Flower-chan went and started drawing the hexagram by digging her kunai into the earth. Meanwhile, Nariko took her index finger and after studying it for a split second, she bit down on it hard, forcing the skin of the thick calloused tip to break. She reached forwards and made the markings on Itachi's face, reciting the incantation over and over in her head. The demon squirmed

uncomfortably in her stomach, and was trying to speak to her in her mind, but she forced it out. She knew it was probably going to try and scare her out of making the transfer, but she wasn't going to let it.

She painted the marks on the back of his left hand, and then slowly went over to his right side, unwrapping some of the bandages that Flower-chan had wrapped on so she could put the markings there too. She winced at the state of it—all the fingers missing, bloodied stumps with burn marks—a long trail of burnt skin down the back. She tried not to touch the burnt skin too much when she made the marking. Itachi's entire condition looked horrible, but oddly enough, she found she could stomach it well enough—maybe because she had seen worse in her dreams when the demon tormented her.

From behind, Flower-chan came up to her, "Hidan probably could've done a better job of it, but I'm done."

Nariko nodded, "We have to move him into the circle."

Silently and somberly, Flower-chan went over to Itachi and put her hands under his shoulders, being careful with his broken arm. Nariko grabbed a hold of his feet, and together they moved him so that he was lying in the center of the circle. He was still unconscious, and inwardly, Nariko was afraid that he might die if they didn't hurry.

Flower-chan straightened up, "Okay, now what?"

"Now, you apply chakra to the circle," Nariko directed, holding tightly to the memory of the ritual.

"Hey, Kit...are you sure that—?"

"Do you want Itachi-niisan to die?" Nariko didn't wait for answer, "If he dies, the leader will still try and take my demon from me. I will still die. But if Itachi-niisan has the demon...he's strong, and I think he could keep it from the leader.

Flower-chan didn't say anything.

"Okay, stand out side the circle," Nariko instructed.

Kneeling down beside the edge of the circle, Flower-chan put her hands on the edge of the groove she'd dug into the ground with her knife, "Okay."

Nariko nodded somberly and knelt down beside Itachi, placing her hands on his chest like she had seen the old host do to her infant body in the demon's memory. She could feel it beneath her as the chakra Flower-chan was applying flowed through the circle. The demon was angry in her stomach, now realizing it was past the point of no return. She took a deep breath.

"Nariko?"

Nariko looked up at Flower-chan.

"I'm so sorry, for everything."

Nariko only smiled, "No. Thank you, Flower-chan, for taking care of me. I was glad to meet you. Take care of Itachi-niisan for me."

Nariko turned away and back to Itachi, not wanting Flower-chan to see the tears that had formed in her eyes. She looked at Itachi's broken and dying body, and knew that she would never regret what she was about to do. She closed her eyes and started the incantation from memory.

"A cage of sacrifice builds up on the heart a funeral pyre. Black burden carried in the pocket of one's heart. A chain between the life force and the collar of the beast," she said, her voice shaking slightly, "Bind, seal, connect."

The plain of water was a living tempest. The thunder clapped at a volume that Nariko had never heard before, the water falling in such

torrents that it made the rains of Amegakure appear as a light drizzle. The wind cycled around in such power that it was taking water from the plain and throwing it into the air against the rain. It was impossible to see, and only from instinct alone Nariko made her way across the plain towards the cliff side. The demon was roaring, the great yowls were clearly made out of pain, and anguish as its soul was being ripped from Nariko's tiny body and channeled into another.

Nariko climbed the rocks before the cliff, her eyes squinted shut against the water, making her way forwards by feel. She could feel her consciousness fading; the body that existed on the plain of water was growing fainter, less and less real. She couldn't feel her feet below the knees anymore, and she knew that they simply weren't there. The feeling was slowly creeping upwards, gradually accelerating as she moved towards the bars.

It was when she could only feel the existence of her head and her right arm and shoulder that she felt her hand meet what she was seeking. And with a last final motion before she faded away entirely, she tore the small slip of paper from the bars—she tore the seal off of the demon's prison.

"I set you free," was the last thing she murmured before she faded away forever.

Even though Konan had worked with Pain for years, and had learned all she could on Bijuu and the Jinchuuriki, she had never actually known what a sealing procedure entailed. Collecting all the Bijuu was something that had, and still seemed so far away that she had never considered what would happen when they would seal them all. She and Pain hadn't talked about it.

But as she watched Nariko before her, she felt stunned as she watched the tiny girl collapse, one last utterance on her lips before she passed away right before Konan's eyes: "I set you free."

What happened next would be something that Konan would never forget, even if she tried to.

The instant Nariko's tiny form collapsed, an aura began to envelop Itachi—Konan instantly recognized it as the demon's chakra. The power radiating off from it was incredible, and it had the most incredible effect; Konan beheld as the Itachi's wounds began to close up, the stab through his chest being the most noticeable. Rising to her feet, she rushed over to Itachi's side, removing the bandages she had wrapped his hand in—the wounds closed over, and all that was left of the burn on the back of his hand was a streak of white scar tissue.

A hand suddenly lunged and grabbed her wrist; she jumped and looked at Itachi—he propped up on his broken arm, his left hand holding her wrist in a vice-like grip. The chakra that was an aura around him was now taking a much more definite form, one that resembled an animal. She glanced at Itachi's face—the damage to his eyes was healed, but the damage to the cornea seemed permanent—white scar tissue formed across his irises and pupils, making them almost undistinguishable. The onyx was gone, the onyx eyes she had only seen a few times in comparison to the constant crimson—the only hint of the irises that was left was a soft brown colour, a colour identical to Nariko's.

"Akatsuki's wench," the voice that came from Itachi's mouth was not his own, "You will pay for wishing to imprison me!"

Konan stared in horror; she wasn't afraid to die, she had never been afraid of death. But seeing what she saw now was enough to cause her poise to crumble slightly from shock. A tail of chakra rose up from behind Itachi and lashed towards her—trapped by Itachi's vice grip, she couldn't move; she only braced herself for impact. An impact that never came. The chakra froze, and the grip on her wrist wavered. There was something about the expression on Itachi's face that suggested that the demon had lost control—a struggling expression played on his face.

"...No," Itachi's voice snapped between clenched teeth.

The grasp on Konan's wrist slackened, and she quickly moved herself back away, as she watched the struggle for control over the host body between Itachi and the demon. Slowly the tail began to recede, and the waves of power dulled slightly, but the chakra aura remained. Itachi was crouched on the ground, like he was confused of his surroundings—but he couldn't see ...what was going on?

It seemed like somehow he noticed Nariko's body lying next to him, lifeless and still. Almost in a delusional manner, he reached out with his left hand and touched her hand.

"Nariko?" Konan heard him murmur.

He picked up her body in his arms, holding her with a bewildered and devastated look on his face.

"Itachi?" Konan asked slowly rising to her feet.

Itachi's head snapped around, like he was aware of her for the first time. And then without word or warning, he broke out into a sprint, running from the clearing dodging in between the trees.

"Itachi!" this time her exclamation was shocked.

She pursued him, but though she ran and ran, eventually she lost him. She could not find him, nor sense his presence. Eventually she gave up, the night swallowing her as she collapsed from exhaustion and chakra expenditure. A pale pink glow was beginning to show on the horizon when she finally made her way painstakingly back towards civilization, sweaty and dirty, her clothes stiff with sea salt, her hair unwashed, no cloak or coat to protect against the morning chill.

For the first time in a long while, she lost her control; she made no outward sign of it, but on the inside, everything she had known in recent days fell apart. Nariko was dead, Itachi gone with her body to

who knows where or why, a Jinchuuriki too. And her—where did that leave her? She didn't think of what the consequences would be for this whole mess. She wasn't thinking in terms of consequence.

And it was that time that was the closest she'd come to crying since she was fifteen years old.

A/N: For those of you who didn't want me to kill Nariko because you'd fallen in love with her character, I am truly sorry. But please understand this: I created Nariko for the sole purpose of dying. Her purpose was to slowly wear away at Itachi so when Madara's hold on him was gone, he realizes even more what he's been doing under Akatsuki. Plus, she needed to save Itachi's life, but that meant giving up her own. I miss her already, too. ;_;

And yes, I'm aware she switched from Itachi-niisama to Itachi-niisan midway through the chapter. I did that on purpose. For you literature buffs, go on, I encourage you to take a stab at why I would do that—from a writer's standpoint.

Chapter 71

A/N: An explanation for Itachi's strange behaviour in the previous chapter will be found here, but to kinda give you a heads up, he was basically high on demon chakra and over-emotional and not thinking straight, yeah. Also, it took him four days to get where he is now.

Chapter Seventy-One: The Return

The sun had not yet risen when Sasuke decided it was time to leave, the only indication of morning was that the sky was no longer black and it was steadily growing lighter. He was eager to leave the Land of Waves, not simply because if his brother was found, he could get in trouble with the local authorities, but because of the curse mark on his shoulder. Without even meaning it, he had broken something that was supposed to be permanent, and while he was keeping it in check with the first seal that had been placed on it, he knew it was a substantially weaker seal.

But that was not the only reason he wanted to go back, there was also someone waiting for him when he arrived—someone he had hurt deeply, but loved dearly. He hoped she could forgive him; even though she had promised that she already had forgiven him for the trespasses he hadn't yet committed against her, he still felt worried that maybe this time she wouldn't be able to forgive him. Either way, he had to make it back to her, whether she would accept him or not.

He plodded along the path that led to the bridge, keeping his face hidden as much as he could in the collar of the Akatsuki cloak—early morning dampness hung around him as he made his way forwards; he hated the damp.

One week had passed, a whole week. Sakura had spent seven long grueling days traveling to the Land of Waves, even though she had cut back on sleep and hadn't stopped long to eat—she hadn't slept at all last night. But even if it hadn't gained her much time, she was still close to her destination. The numbers on the signs were getting smaller, and the amount of sea salt she smelled in the air was getting stronger. There were even getting to be a few people out—devoted fisherman getting up early in the morning.

She was keeping a brisk pace on the road, using her chakra to strengthen her legs—she was trembling slightly from hunger, the last soldier pill she'd taken had worn off. Not much farther, she promised her weary body, she'd eat once she got into town. Just down the road was the bridge that she, Naruto, and Sasuke had helped protect while it was being built. She pushed her legs to begin running; in less than five minutes, she'd be one step closer to finding Sasuke.

Sasuke walked over the cobbles slowly, his hands in the pockets of the robes. He wasn't rushing to leave despite his desire to leave sooner rather than later—rushing meant he was suspicious, and the last thing he wanted was to be stopped and found covered with his brother's blood. He was almost at the bridge though, and once on the other side, he would find a river or something so he could wash, but until then he would just have to take it easy.

The Great Naruto Bridge—the first time he'd seen the name declared loudly in a carved wooden sign above it, he had almost laughed. To think they had named the bridge after Naruto, that dobe. Even now, Sasuke chuckled slightly to himself at the notion. He supposed if Naruto attained the title of Hokage, it would make the name sound a little more valiant, but never to Sasuke. To Sasuke, he'd always be reminded of his idiot of a best friend, Hokage or not.

He wondered if Naruto knew about the bridge's name. Probably not—or he would have most likely heard of it from Naruto himself. That moron would most likely let it go to his head if he knew. Maybe he

would tell Naruto when he got back, if he got the chance to. Assuming that he wasn't arrested on sight—

Sasuke froze for an instant, his eyes widening in surprise in that split second before he broke out into a flat-out run. Forget being inconspicuous. He just couldn't believe it, there was just no way...but what else could explain it? His legs carried him over the threshold of the bridge, over the expert construction; it was a long bridge, and his eyes scanned over it, darting past the very few merchants and traders that were making an early morning arrival, looking for the slightest hit of pink.

Midway across the bridge he caught sight of her. There was Sakura running in the opposite direction, coming over the bridge. He stopped dead upon sight of her, gawking at her haggard appearance. She looked sickly, thin, and gaunt; her hair was missing the glossy sheen and her eyes were underlined with dark bags. She looked like the personification of exhaustion. It was only ten days ago he'd seen her, looking bright and as young as anything. Was it possible for such a transformation to take place on a person in such a short amount of time?

It was then that Sakura caught sight of him too, stopping in her tracks just as quickly as he had. He was overwhelmed with disbelief, completely taken aback by her presence. But his muted feelings of incredulity paled in comparison to those of absolute horror.

Sakura felt her mouth fall open as she stared at Sasuke in wide-eyed shock; she felt a feeling of horror splash over her with a numbing sort of sensation. If she didn't see Sasuke as he was before her now, she never would have believed it. Sasuke clothed head to toe in Akatsuki garb—his headband showing the scratched mark—it was just incomprehensible.

She was rooted to the spot; she had never been angry with Sasuke before now. She had always been patient, supporting, and caring—she loved him, and she couldn't feel anger towards him—but now,

she couldn't feel anything else. He had kissed her, and left to kill Itachi—that was one thing—but it was just so infuriating that he had the *audacity* to join Akatsuki.

He was the one to break the silence, "Sakura, I—"

Her vocal skills returned. " 'Sakura, I—'? Don't you 'Sakura, I—' me!" she shouted suddenly, silencing Sasuke instantly, "Do you have *any* idea what these past ten days have been like for me?"

He didn't say anything; he looked guilty. Good.

"I've been worried sick! What if you *died*?! What if you were hurt so badly that you couldn't get help?" she hollered, her fury cascading down in a tirade, "Leaving me behind, no warning, a kiss goodbye and good night's sleep on a stone bench?! And on top of all that you join Akatsuki?! You have some nerve!"

"I—" he started, but that was all he could get in.

"Sasuke, you told me once that I was like a pink rose," she blurted out suddenly, "But what you don't know is that the day you left four years ago, that rose started to wither away. You are like my water, my life force. I flourished by your side, Sasuke. But you left again, and I was withering a second time. Sasuke, I don't want to wither away, I want to be by your side always."

He didn't say anything, simply stoically taking her words. He knew they were true; she *knew* he knew they were true. His face was expressionless, but she saw in his eyes the guilt he felt. For some reason that frustrated her further. One felt guilt when one *knew* one was doing something wrong—he *knew* joining Akatsuki, hurting her, betraying everyone was wrong. But he had still done it.

"Fine!" she shouted, earning her some looks from passersby; she reached up and took off her headband. Reaching back to her kunai pouch she withdrew a kunai, "If this is what I have to do in order to allow my rose to flourish and bloom, then I will do it."

Sasuke saw her poise the knife and he knew what she intended to do. Without thinking, he activated the Sharingan, rushing forwards as fast as he could. It was like it was in slow motion as he saw her begin to drag the knife across the headband's metal guard. He reached out with his hand—he had to stop her, he couldn't let her decided to be a traitor, not for him. The knife was halfway across the leaf insignia when his hand closed over the knife and the protector; he stared Sakura in the eye as he felt the knife bite into his hand. He squeezed his grip tighter.

"Don't."

Sasuke had moved so fast she had barely had time to let the motion register. It was only when he was staring down at her with a deadly serious expression on his face and when the kunai had stopped moving that it fully clicked. Her eyes widened.

"Don't," he uttered, his voice severe.

There was a beat of silence, a beat in which all her anger was replaced by grief and frustration. And out of sheer desperation, she acted on the first impulse that came to mind: she leaned forwards and matched his lips with hers.

When Sakura kissed him, Sasuke reciprocated it like she hadn't been yelling at him ten seconds ago, like his hand wasn't clamped firmly over a kunai knife and bleeding. It seemed natural to kiss her now; it was the only thing that made sense in this chaos. He grabbed the kunai and the forehead protector, and threw them to the ground, seizing her up in his arms properly. He ran his fingers through the strands of her pink hair, pulling her close against him, unaware that he was probably smearing blood from his hand over her back. He matched the kiss with equal fervor, deepening it as he held her against his body.

When the kiss ended, he did not look at her face, but instead held her close against his chest, not wanting to let her go. He lowered his head towards her ear, closing his eyes as the early morning sun shone on them—a new type of dawn.

"The day the clan was killed, my rose turned black and died," her murmured to her, knowing she could hear him, "But you were my eyes when I could not see, you were my light when darkness enveloped me, and you were my love in my world of hate. You turned my black rose red; you brought me to life."

He could hear her breathing quietly, and he could feel wetness on his shirt from silent tears, "And what about Itachi?"

He held her closer, like he was protecting her still, even though now there was no need. Sakura was safe from Itachi now—there was nothing Itachi could do to harm anyone in Konoha any longer. He was simply powerless.

"Itachi is no longer a threat," was all Sasuke answered.

Konan was used to people dying on her. She'd grown up in the latter end of the Great Shinobi Wars, losing both her parents, and being witness to death over and over. She'd lost Yahiko, and a number of other people she'd grown to know during her time in Kumogakure. She had just adjusted to letting people walk out of her life against her will, and just refused to feel any pain. But as she stood in Itachi's room, looking around at the various things there, she felt a kind of anguish she hadn't felt in years, an anguish she wasn't supposed to feel.

She set her jaw and surveyed the room, setting her mind in a tactical mode—she was viewing this room as the Messenger of God now, Konan was not available. Now that Itachi was off who knew where, he would be treated like he went missing in action, and she would deal with his things accordingly. She would have them packed up and shipped off to Amegakure. She would also have to do the same

with what few belongings Nariko had, and she should probably begin on a full detailed report to Pain, explaining what happened.

But Konan didn't know where to start. Her eyes traveled over the room: at the curtains that were half open, a slight breeze coming in through the open window; at the extra set of shoes sitting next to the door, neatly set aside; at the stack of neatly folded clothes on top of the dresser in the corner; at neatly made-up bed in which just over twenty-four hours ago they had shared what was their unbeknownst last night. Konan wandered over to the bed and ran her fingertips lightly over the top sheet, trying not to think. It was very hard not to.

A thunderous knock came from the door, and Konan turned her head towards it quizzically. It was still early in the morning, the sun had only risen half an hour ago—who could be calling this in the early hours? The booming knock came again, and slowly Konan wandered over to the door, grasping the handle with her fingers delicately; her hands were shaking. She opened the door tentatively, keeping only a six-inch crack to see through.

"About time, Itachi! I didn't want to start yelling your name this early in the—" Kisame started, but then stopped.

Konan blinked and opened the door all the way. "Sushi," she said, her voice quiet, but a note of surprise there, "What are you doing here?"

Kisame's expression was one of surprise; he took in her appearance, her unkempt hair, her dirtied face, her stiff attire, "Forget why I'm here, what the hell happened to you?"

Sighing, Konan motioned for Kisame to come into the room, wandering back inside herself. She indicated for him to sit on a chair, while she went and stared out the window.

"Where's Itachi?" the chair creaked as Kisame settled himself on it, "And the girl?"

"Can you answer my question first about why you're here?" Konan asked instead, her voice completely monotone; she was trying to collect her thoughts, and she wasn't even sure where to begin.

"Okay sure," Kisame sounded confused, but seemed willing enough to wait, "I got an avian messenger from Pain saying that as soon as I was done sorting out the mess you had reassigned me on, to go check up on you and Itachi. By the way he worded the letter, it's pretty clear that he's pissed at you for changing his orders; I thought you told him you were going instead of me."

Konan scoffed sardonically, "I didn't. And he's going to be even more pissed off now once he finds out what's happened here."

"Why? What *did* happen?" Kisame asked again.

Konan turned away from the window and leaned against the wall, crossing her arms. She closed her eyes for an instant, taking a quiet breath before starting; it was hard to form the words without thinking too hard. She opened her eyes and not looking at Kisame.

"For the past couple weeks, Itachi, the Jinchuuriki Nariko, and I have been making searches along the coastlines of the islands for signs indicating that the Sanbi was still in this area of the ocean," Konan started, her voice formal and firm.

"Sure, that was the mission Itachi and I were supposed to go on," Kisame said, urging her to get to the point.

"Things were going fine for the most part. We'd split up, and each of us would take turns bringing Nariko. But yesterday, due to the sequence of unforeseen circumstances, Itachi for all intents and purposes is missing, and Nariko is dead," Konan stated—her voice had started out strong, but as her sentences had carried on, her voice was beginning to lose some of its firmness.

"Dead?" Kisame looked shocked. Konan knew why—from his point of view, they'd lost the demon. Not only was this a problem, it would

look really bad on her part, especially since it was under the care of her and Itachi.

"I don't know how or when Uchiha Sasuke caught wind of our whereabouts, especially since last I heard he had rejoined Konoha, but yesterday he came to take revenge on Itachi for killing the Uchiha clan," she didn't want to elaborate on Nariko's death right away if she could help it, but talking about Itachi was just as hard. Dammit, she wasn't supposed to be having this much difficulty pushing her emotions away.

Kisame on the other hand, didn't say anything; he paled considerably though, turning his blue skin a mottled, blotchy baby blue. Konan closed her eyes again, trying to compose herself inwardly. It was harder than it ever should have been—how many other people had died before this that she had just shrugged off as mere casualties?

Kisame finally spoke, "So you haven't been able to find Itachi's body yet, or...?"

"We found it—Nariko was with me at the time—but..." she trailed off, cleared her throat and tried again, "It wasn't pretty at all. He was barely alive when we found him."

Kisame left a pause for her to continue. She wished she didn't have to. She knew exactly why she didn't want to, but she pretended to be ignorant.

"Uchiha Sasuke took out both his eyes, broke his arm, cut off all the fingers on his right hand, and stabbed him through the shoulder," Konan murmured, her voice barely above a whisper, "I've seen stuff like that before, but...to see it happen to someone you *know* ...?"

"Gods," Kisame said in disbelief, "But he was still alive...?"

"Yes," Konan answered, still refusing to look directly at Kisame, "Somehow Nariko managed to figure out how to transfer her demon

into Itachi, and that healed him, at the cost of Nariko's life. Did you know that she knew what was going to happen to her? She knew that we were going to kill her?"—she didn't wait for him to answer—"I don't know what came over Itachi, but the moment his wounds were healed, he almost attacked me, and then when he seemed to gain more control, he grabbed Nariko's body and ran off. I tried following, but he was too fast. I don't know where he went, or if he's still even in the country."

"And this all happened *last night*?" Kisame sounded astounded.

A bitter flavour had been building in Konan's mouth—she swallowed it to the best of her ability, "Yeah."

"And what about you? You didn't run into Uchiha Sasuke, did you?"

"No, Nariko and I ran into the Sanbi while Itachi was fighting Sasuke," Konan said with a shake of her head, "I fell into the ocean, and haven't had a chance to clean up since."

Kisame's face was grim, and Konan was sure that there was a similar expression on her face. She turned and looked out the window again. Where was Itachi now, she wondered, was he closer than they thought? Was he out in the woods somewhere, stumbling around blindly? Had someone found him? What was he going to do with Nariko's body?

"Look, why don't you get cleaned up, and then we'll pack up Itachi's things so we can send 'em back to Amegakure," Kisame said after a resolute pause, "You'd better write to Pain about the situation here, too. And then we can decide what we do from there."

Konan could only nod dumbly in response.

Kisame and Konan worked together to gather Itachi's things, putting them away in crates they had acquired from the early morning market. It didn't take them long—like her, Itachi hadn't brought along

a lot of things. Still, in some vain hope, Konan hoped that she would find something among his few belongings—a memento, a keepsake of sorts that she could hang onto, ponder, wonder at the person who was Uchiha Itachi. Something she could use to keep him close, to help keep the unbidden emotions at bay.

She could find none.

When Itachi regained a sense of himself, he was first and foremost aware of his lullaby playing in his head. Once he had established the playing of the tune, it became easier to become aware of everything else. The next thing he felt was confusion as to where he was and what he was doing. He remembered everything up until the point where Nariko had told him that she had known all along what was going to happen to her, after that it was a blur of scattered images. He knew he was blind, but somehow he could see, and what he could see caused him to go cold.

In his arms, he held the small stiff body of Nariko. The girl's eyes were closed, her homely-coloured hair hanging away from her face. The over-sized Akatsuki cloak she always wore covered her hands and feet, and smears of his own blood could be seen splattered over the front. There was a serene look on her lifeless face, one of peace.

Nariko had given up her life to save him, which meant that...

A wicked cackle played his head, mixing with a continuous playing of the lullaby in his head, *'That's right, Uchiha. You're my host now.'*

Itachi was dumbstruck, and then his vision suddenly tore away from Nariko's body, against his will. The demon laughed mockingly at his newfound confusion.

'You are sightless, Uchiha,' the demon snickered, *'So, whose sight do you think you're using?'*

"Yours," Itachi said aloud, his mind sobering from confusion to crestfallen acknowledgment. Nariko had died saving him.

' This sight is not yours to have constantly. Sadly, when I take a new host, my chakra runs through the body for days afterwards,' the demon said snidely, as if it wanted Itachi to be certain that he did not take the sight he had for granted, *'Once that wears off, you will not see again unless it is by my say.'*

Itachi stood motionless, unsure of what to think or say, if anything.

' Look around you, Uchiha Itachi, tell me where you have brought yourself,' the demon commanded.

Using the demon's sight, he observed the area around him. He was standing in a small village, surrounded by a thick forest. The terrain was familiar—a main road leading between houses and stores. It was the dead of night, and the moonlight cast familiar shadows, making the terrain seem even more memorable to him. An alleyway, yes, he'd killed someone who had come out of that alleyway there... someone...a drunk, yes, he remembered. And up ahead, there would be a market square. The town was so familiar, yet he couldn't quite place where he had seen it before.

It wasn't until he reached the market square that he realized.

' Yes, you do know this place,' the demon hissed, *'It's the Nariko-child's hometown. The very same town you took her away from.'*

In silent shock, Itachi wandered forward, the demon's sight allowing him to drink in every detail of the world around him. Things had hardly changed; the cobbled square was the same, the open space. It was close to here that he the loose cobblestone could be found—the secret path to where Nariko's old prison could be found. Slowly he picked his way forwards, until he found the spot.

Here was where it had all began, unbeknownst to everyone, and here was where it ended. Had the demon brought him here on

purpose? Or was it his own subconscious mind that had brought him to this place during the time he could not remember. He wasn't sure.

And when the demon is gone, you can return here, and they will accept you.

I am to make sure you gain some strength before we take it out of you, then we shall lock up the demon and you will be returned home.

His own words, his empty promises to Nariko came to mind and felt regret wash over him in a wave of anguish. Such an innocent girl, and innocent and kind girl—she deserved better than any of the fates that had been spelled out for her. Yet she had to live one of them, and this was the destiny she had faced and died for. Kneeling down on the cobbled ground Itachi laid her small body on top of the stone that led to the room Nariko had known most of her life.

"I kept my promise," he could feel tears in his sightless eyes.

Itachi was long gone by the time the sun's rays first touched the village. Long gone before the first of the merchants emerged to set up shop for the day. Itachi was miles away when the first person found Nariko's dead body in the middle of the square. He was hours away as the villagers gathered around her body in confusion and discord, wondering what the appearance of the demon's host's body could mean. Itachi would never know that they decided to bury her with the remnants of her family, next to the drunken man Itachi had killed a year ago—a man who was actually Nariko's biological father.

Itachi would never return to that village to know whatever became of her...

...to know that she had been placed under a stone that bore a name different to only one she knew...

...or to know that only in death had the villagers accepted her.

She and Kisame stayed four days after Nariko's death and Itachi's disappearance, only on Konan's request. To return to Amegakure was something that she didn't need—an added blow on her already injured state of being. Initially she had been confused about her reaction, but now as the days wore on, she became more focused on trying to contain her reaction rather than pondering why it was. And even then she was failing.

Her script flowed over the paper as she wrote, making another attempt at writing a report to Pain of what had happened. If one looked closely, it could be seen that the lines were marred by a slight tremble.

The situation at present is such that —

Konan balled up the letter with frustrated fury. She threw it across the room where it bounced off the wall and almost hit Kisame. She didn't notice. She clenched her hands into fists and banged them once on the table.

"Dammit!" she shouted, and then put her forehead to the table's surface, "Dammit, dammit!"

Everything just felt so... *wrong*. Things like this happened too often to her. Things like this never happened to anyone else, only to her, it seemed. Life around her was chaos—it had been orderly, manageable, and straightforward before. Now she couldn't guess what would happen—or when. Itachi was gone, as good as dead, if not worse; Nariko dead; she was in trouble with Pain big time, and he didn't even know the worse of it yet. Not only had she come on this mission and ordered Kisame elsewhere without permission, but she had also brought the Rokubi Jinchuuriki along, lost the demon and lost her teammate.

She was second-in-command. She was an Angel. She was to know her place, hold her power, and prove her worth. Closing her eyes, she felt the cool wood of the desk's surface against her forehead, letting it soothe her rampant mind. She was shaking.

"This wasn't supposed to happen," she whispered.

"Flower-chan, none of us expected this to happen," Kisame said, in that way that made him a decent guy, "I'm upset, too. Itachi was a good guy, and it's a shame to lose him."

"You don't understand!" she exclaimed—almost shouted—at him, not raising her head from the desk, "I'm not supposed to care! I'm not supposed to be this torn up about it!"

She'd built her walls and constructed her refuges since Yahiko had died. Yet everything was crumbling away like her fortifications were made of sand, and Itachi was sweeping over them like the ocean waves. Everything was falling apart so fast that she was scrambling to hide in what little shelter remained. If she had been here in the Land of Waves with Kisame, or Hidan, or Zetsu, and these events had happened, she wouldn't be like this—she wouldn't be shattering from the inside out.

"I just don't understand why!" she whispered harshly to herself.

That was a lie, and she knew it. She knew why she was so shaken, so unsettled. She had let herself be the older sister to Nariko, and she had let herself be more than just benefits with Itachi. She'd lost her sister, and she'd lost her companion.

"Itachi's a Jinchuuriki now," she said quietly, raising her head off the table, blankly staring mirror hanging on the wall in front of her; she could see Kisame's sympathetic gaze. She hated that look: the sympathy in his eyes, "We'll have to hunt him. No matter the fact he worked for us, and worked for us well. He's got something Pain wants. And we *will* find him, and Pain *will* bring him, and he *will* die. And that..."

...that would destroy something that should have never existed in the first place. She'd broken her own rule, she'd let the words behind the locked door mean something. She'd cared.

"Attachment is forbidden," she whispered at her reflection in the mirror.

The instant the words passed over the threshold of her lips, her eyes darted over to Kisame in alarm. But his facial expression hadn't changed at all; he merely rose to his feet and made his way to the door of the room. He paused when he passed her, putting his large denim-coloured hand on her shoulder.

"Pain may see a lot of what goes on," he said in a matter-of-fact way, "But he doesn't hear everything."

He dropped his hand and went to the door, where he paused again. He looked up at the ceiling in a thoughtful manner, "As for me, I'm getting as old and as deaf as anything."

Sakura felt like she was in the middle of a dream as she and Sasuke made their way back to Konoha; the weather was warm, and combined with her dazed state of undernourishment, and her state of euphoria, everything seemed like it was surreal. But no, somehow it was entirely real—it was true. Sasuke had somehow won against Itachi, and now, the two of them were making their way home. He was there to stay, always; furthermore, he loved her. It just seemed too good to be true.

The days traveling were spent blissfully; the days were spent hand in hand, and in the evening they would set up camp with their sleeping bags side by side. Sasuke was by no means a changed person, he was still reserved and quiet, but Sakura could sense the difference in his words and in his actions. Nothing had changed, really. They were still talking and joking like they had been for the past few months, but every response from Sasuke was said in a different manner. She could hear the love there, and it sent an exhilarating happiness through her.

But it was day four before she and Sasuke started taking the future seriously. In three short days, they would be returning home, and

they had to prepare themselves for what was awaiting them. Both of them had left the village without permission, and both of them would be considered traitors, and while she might be able to get off with a lighter sentence, Sasuke's criminal status would land him a heavier one.

It was night, the two of them lying with their sleeping bags side by side, sprawled out next to the campfire. Where there had been happiness in the past four days of travel, there was now an atmosphere of seriousness, and melancholy.

"What'll happen to you when we get back?" he asked her, holding her close against his chest, their sleeping bags preventing them from getting any closer.

At first Sakura didn't register the question. It took her by mild surprise, and she immediately knew why he was worried.

"To me?" Sakura asked absently, "Don't worry about me, you should be more worried for yourself."

She felt him shake his head against her neck, "I knew what kinds of punishments I would be facing before I decided to leave. I am prepared to accept whatever they hand me, even if it is death."

"I don't know if they'll sentence you to death," Sakura said, "But you could end up imprisoned, for years, or for life."

"My sentence was death last time, if I refused to cooperate," Sasuke answered, his voice quiet.

"Oh, that..." Sakura smiled a little guiltily, "Actually, I made that up, so that you *would* cooperate."

A pause, and Sakura could sense that Sasuke was vaguely annoyed.

" *Would* you have cooperated if you didn't face the prospect of being put to death?" Sakura asked in her defense, she highly doubted that he would have. There was another pause and then her belief was confirmed shortly.

"Probably not," was the reluctant reply, but she could only smile; his voice changed to one more serious, "But what will happen to you?"

"I might get community service, or I could be stripped of my station as a medic, but I don't really care about that. I have you, that's enough," Sakura answered, her voice equally as serious.

"I'll take your punishment in addition to mine," he told her, "It was my fault you left to start with."

Sakura squirmed out of Sasuke's arms so she could face him; she fixed him with a severe look, "Don't you dare even suggest that."

"But—"

"No," Sakura said firmly, "I will not have you bearing my punishment too. Whatever happens, we'll face it together, okay? We won't let them separate us, okay?"

Sasuke studied her face seriously, searching hers for something—maybe some sort of weakness that he could use to get her to sway, to get her to give up her punishment. But she wouldn't let him find one, because she was strong in her resolve, she was also willing to face whatever punishments came, to shoulder the responsibility for her actions.

"Alright," he said finally, touching his forehead to hers.

She moved and kissed his cheek briefly, "Why are you so worried about me?"

There was the quietest of sighs; he looked up at the sky. "I did all of this for you. I was..." he paused for a second, his voice failing him

for a minute, "...scared that Itachi would come again and take everything that was important to me a second time. I didn't want to lose you. When I opened my eyes, it became imperative that I keep you safe. I've come to discover you do not need to be blind in order to be unable to see. You were the one who taught me to see again, Sakura, the one who taught me to see what was really important."

Sakura found a mellow smile spread across her face. That night, almost two weeks ago, when he left the second time, she had doubted that she had reached him, she thought she had failed in showing him what really mattered. When he had knocked her unconscious, she thought that he was the same as last time, but hearing the words from his voice right now made her realize. No, it wasn't true; she had reached him a long time ago.

It was Naruto who had first discovered that Sakura was missing. Everyone had given her space like she had wanted, and it wasn't until about a week after she had left that people started to suspect. Sakura's mother had come by and knocked gently on the door, to receive no reply, and peering through a window, she saw the shoes were gone, and assumed Sakura was out. Kanaye had also come by, and was a little more persistent, but still left after a while. Three additional days had passed.

The forth day of the second week—eleven days after Sakura had left, Naruto made his round. He, like Kanaye, was persistent, but then left after a while as well. But unlike Sakura's brother, Naruto came the following day and the day after that, until he practically broke the door down, before realizing it wasn't locked to start with. It was the day before Sasuke and Sakura arrived back in Konoha that Naruto discovered Sakura's tiny note left on the kitchen table. Needless to say, he panicked.

"We're almost there," Sakura said quietly, as the two of them walked forwards on the familiar path.

"I know."

Around the next bend they would be able to see the village gates, and around that next bend lay whatever was waiting for them. Sakura was plodding forwards slowly, hanging on to Sasuke's arm securely as they walked. To be entirely honest with herself, she hadn't been eating properly the past two weeks, and even though she was there with Sasuke, she still knew she would feel the most comfortable when they finally got home, even with the chaos that may spring up around them. She was feeling very fatigued, and she couldn't help but find her energy drained.

"Are you alright?" Sasuke asked, pausing.

She shook her head, "I'm okay...just a bit tired. We're almost there, right?"

He put his arm around her more securely, holding her close against him, half supporting her, "Right."

And it was in this manner, arm in arm, that the two of them crossed the threshold of the Village Hidden in the Leaves.

Naruto was with a group of ANBU that had been thrown together in less than a day—it was quite amazing how quickly Tsunade had managed to get things together when he had rushed to her office in a blur yesterday, yelling in a distressed manner at the top of his lungs. He wasn't even sure how she was able to comprehend what he had been trying to tell her, because even to his own ears, he sounded incoherent.

She also hadn't hesitated in permitting him to join the ANBU team. There were six of them, including himself and Kakashi-sensei, who'd been put on the team. There was also a guy named Yamato, and a guy named Sai, who Naruto was certain was the guy from the Chuunin Exam that Sasuke had told him about. The other two people had names that Naruto couldn't remember for the life of him.

It was about the early evening when the six of them were geared up and ready to go. They were standing by the entrance to the gates of Konoha just shouldering their backpacks and re-checking their supplies, in the yellowy-orange light. The sun was going to set in a couple hours, and already the light was beginning to give indication of that. Naruto didn't mind traveling at night, but he wouldn't put it past the team to stop more often than he wanted. Even ANBU had to eat and sleep, he grumbled to himself, completely omitting the fact that he needed to eat and sleep too.

But they never even got a chance to leave the village. Because just as Sai was making some off comment to his superiors before they were going to leave, Kakashi spoke up.

"Well, I can hardly believe it," he said with a tone of awe, and quickly, five more heads turned to see what he was looking at.

Naruto could hardly believe it either. Just entering the shadow of the gates of Konoha were Sasuke and Sakura, arm in arm, looking utterly exhausted. The two of them were walking forwards slowly but surely, and they seemed completely oblivious to their surroundings, or at least they acted that way. They did not glance towards the ANBU team that was standing not ten meters away from them, but kept walking into the village. Sakura's gaze was on the ground in front of her, and Sasuke's gaze was only for Sakura. Naruto knew very well that Sasuke would have sensed all of their signatures before he could even see the gates.

Naruto felt a seriousness come over him, but not a melancholic seriousness. It was almost a venerated feeling he felt as he saw his two best friends—equivalent to siblings—walk back into the village.

"Shouldn't we try to...?" Sai started, taking a step towards them, but Naruto put his arm out in front of the young man, stopping him. Sai fell silent.

Naruto knew it would be okay.

It was in the orange light of evening that April day that Tsunade stood out on the balcony on the roof of the Hokage Tower. It had been a stressful few weeks, what with Sasuke's disappearance on them, and then only to learn yesterday that Sakura had gone after him, in hopes of bringing him back. Among other trivial things, it was just too much—she needed a break. The warm day beckoned her and she decided to treat herself with ten minutes' peace, allowing herself not to care anything about her responsibilities. Only ten minutes.

But when you are the Hokage, even ten minutes is hard enough to find. She had gotten only five minutes before the fated calls rang out.

"Tsunade-sama!" came the voice of Shizune as the woman ran up the stairs in a hurried manner. The clacking toes of Ton Ton the pig could also be heard echoing up and out the door to the roof, "Tsunade-sama! Tsunade-sama!"

Tsunade closed her eyes for a moment, and she sighed, deciding to take her four and a half minutes as good enough. She turned to her vigilant secretary as the younger woman ran up, panting.

"What is it, Shizune?" Tsunade asked, in her stern, but not unkind, voice.

"There's just been word sent back from the village entrance!" Shizune huffed, "The ANBU team you deployed earlier never got to leave—apparently Sasuke and Sakura returned as they were about to depart!"

"What?" Tsunade felt her eyes widen in disbelief.

"Yes!" Shizune sounded as surprised as Tsunade felt.

"Did they arrest them on sight?" Tsunade asked with sudden alarm.

Shizune shook her head quickly, "No, they let them go, apparently. They look like they're walking home, they should pass by here on their way."

Tsunade turned her head down to the streets, coming through the people who were passing by, but it wasn't for about thirty more seconds that she finally spotted them at the end of the street. With mild fascination and a touch of astonishment, she watched as the two walked forwards, their arms around each other. As they got closer she recognized the signs of fatigue, and the residual signs of stress on Sakura.

"Well, I'll be..." she murmured quietly; Shizune stood beside her, craning her neck.

There was something different between the two of them, and it took a moment for Tsunade to realize that it was the loving way that Sasuke was talking quietly to Sakura as they walked, the way he was holding her. Could it be that perhaps Sasuke had fallen in love with Sakura too?

There was something else that Tsunade noticed, though she was surprised she noticed at all. It was the way the sun caught Sakura's forehead protector that showed it clearly. There was a partial scratch across the metal, a deep scratch that only made it halfway across the leaf design. She couldn't imagine how it'd happened.

"Tsunade-sama?" Shizune asked hesitantly, "What should we do?"

Tsunade didn't answer, her eyes trained on the walking figures. And then, quite unexpectedly, Sasuke turned his head upwards, and looked at her—directly at the Hokage. She paused in surprise, but did not look away. There was a seriousness in the boy's eyes that she somehow understood—a wordless look that told all. There was slight tension, an apprehension, like something was going to happen. He held her gaze for a moment longer, his obsidian eyes almost challenging her as he looked, and then he broke his gaze away and fixed his sight on the path ahead.

The tension slipped away and was gone, leaving a feeling of ease. Tsunade understood.

"We do nothing, for now," Tsunade said calmly, turning away from the edge of the balcony and making her way towards indoors.

She would make sure that neither of them received a hefty punishment, because she knew that things were going to be okay. From here onwards, there would be no more problems stemming from Uchiha Sasuke.

A/N: Oh good gods! The Nariko angst! I almost cried at the end of Itachi's segment. It's hard to write Sasuke in love with Sakura without going all *Twilight* without meaning too. (That was not a direct attack on *Twilight* , btw. I used to really like *Twilight* , before it became popular. I just 'like' *Twilight* now. I'm not usually one to give up something just because it's popular, but some of the Edward Cullen fangirls put Sasuke's fangirls to shame. They scare me.)

And I loved the last scene (even though I was the one who wrote it, lol). I had it planned out in my head from—guess—two years ago. That moment where Sasuke stares Tsunade down, wordlessly explaining everything and nothing at the same time. I love it! And le gaspe! Only the epilogue left!!! D: And even though Naruto let Sasuke and Sakura go when he saw them, he went and punched Sasuke later (for those of you who thought Sasuke deserved it. ;)).

And somehow I turned my editor into a Kisame fangirl O.o She told me she had no strong feelings towards Kisame one way or another before this chapter, but towards the end of the scene involving him and Konan, she said her inner was going: "Kiiiisaaaameeee~" And waving her arms happily. It was very...strange. XD

Epilogue

A/N: Well, this is it guys: the end of a long road. It's been an interesting experience, and it's been tough sometimes. Between time management and bumps in the road, it's been a bit of a rollercoaster. I loved writing this story, and I love all the support that I've received over these past two years. Thanks for sticking with me to the end. I promised I'd make it, and I did. Some of you have been with me since chapter one, and I really want to thank those people who were the first ones to show their support with their astonishing eleven reviews for the first chapter. Back then, that seemed like such a huge number. But even though I'm well into the thousands now, that number was where it all started.

Thanks everyone, it's been a great journey.

Epilogue: Crossing the Line

It was with a shared exhaustion that the two of them stumbled into the Uchiha Manor, discarding shoes and backpacks at the door before making their way to the bedroom, both in want of sleep. It had been a tiring journey for the both of them, both physically and emotionally, and rest was much needed. Sakura had been the one to suggest that they try to return to the house, and not stop unless somebody told them to, and, surprisingly, nobody had. And it seemed reasonable to assume that if nobody bothered them yet, that nobody would bother them until tomorrow.

Sasuke was so tired that he just discarded the clothes he had traveled in, crawling into bed with only his boxers on. Sakura had paused hesitantly, and then shyly voiced that her pajamas were in her backpack. Sakura in undergarments was nothing he hadn't seen before, and he told her as much. And so Sakura took her designated place beside Sasuke, clothed similarly. But despite the situation,

there was no awkwardness, only understanding and acceptance. The only difference between now and the teahouse incident was that they had a nice warm bed, and this time there was nothing separating the two of them.

As the two of them drifted off to sleep, they felt perfection, completeness. They were where they were supposed to be: in the village they were meant to live in, under the roof they felt safe under, and in each other's arms. Nothing could ruin that paradise.

But as the saying goes, all good things must come to an end.

It was the following morning when a young man with good intentions stumbled upon their paradise—he was named Kanaye. And perhaps their paradise would have been left undisturbed if Kanaye had given up on the door when nobody answered it. But unfortunately, he remembered the spare key kept under the corner shingle of the veranda.

Kanaye meant well, he honestly did; his family had gotten word from the Hokage that Sakura had returned, and all he wanted was to check on his sister, to make sure she was all right. He would peek on her and go. That had been his plan, and he held true to it, though what he saw was not what he had been expecting. He knew his sister well enough to suspect that she'd moved back into Sasuke's room during his absence, and it was likely that was where she would be upon return. He had cracked the door open to Sasuke's room first.

Kanaye's outward reaction to what he saw through the crack was mild—his eyes widened and he raised his eyebrows immensely. But Inner Kanaye's jaw dropped to the floor, and his Inner's brain exploded, followed by a freak-out session. It was bad enough to see Sasuke and Sakura in the same bed together, their arms wrapped around each other. But it was definitely worse to see that Sasuke's chest was bare, and that Sakura was only in her underwear. But Kanaye's brotherly instincts mentally Photoshopped what he saw, so

that in his mind, they weren't just in their undergarments, but were completely without clothing at all.

All things considered, he was quite composed and rational as he closed the door again, walked out of the house and left, leaving no indication he had ever been there. To Sasuke and Sakura, their moment of bliss had been undisturbed, but the aftermath of what Kanaye had seen would strike a day later, after his parents found out.

It was as Sasuke came home from the first of many interrogations that he came across Sakura in front of her suitcase, putting things away in it. He stopped and stared.

"What are you doing?" he asked her, suddenly plagued with worry.

She stopped with the item in her hands, letting it drop into her lap; she fidgeted with the fabric between her fingers. There was a gloomy expression residing on her face.

"I'm packing," she replied quietly.

"Why?"

"Tsunade-sama called me to her office today," her voice still low and saddened, "Apparently, Kanaye saw us sleeping in the same bed, and when my parents found out, they told the Hokage that if she could order me here, she could just as easily order me to leave. She told me that my mission here was completed long ago and that I no longer had any reason to stay here. She told me that if I refused to leave..."

She trailed off and sighed.

"What?"

"She threatened to disband Team Seven," she finished, then she turned towards him, her eyes looking hurt, "I couldn't argue. I can't do that to our team, to Naruto. She's right. There are no other reasons for me to stay. Your sight and Sharingan are restored, and you've managed to gain enough strength back to kill your brother. I have no viable reason to stay here, save for selfish ones."

Sasuke was silent for a moment, "It just had to be now."

Sakura nodded grimly. With the most intimate aspect of their relationship now known, Sakura's parents were concerned about how much more intimate their relationship could become. He could understand that, even though he would never force Sakura to do anything she did not want to. It was only his word against everyone else's though, the word of a criminal—there were still an outstanding number of hours that left to work off.

It was Sakura who broke the silence, "Well, I suppose we should look at this more positively. After all, it's not like I've been asked to leave the village so I can never see you again. I mean there's still missions, training, and plain old hanging out."

"Tch."

A small smile crossed her face. "'Tch' indeed," she sighed, "I know what you mean. It's not the end of the world, but it'll still feel..."

"...off," he finished for her, and she gave a forlorn nod.

There was a lingering silence afterwards and when neither of them moved, Sasuke sighed, and turned to leave the room again, "Let me know when you're finished. I'll help carry things."

He left the room before she was able to comment. It seemed that they couldn't hold out forever, and they had finally lost.

In the days that followed, things seemed strange to both Sasuke and Sakura. Without the constant company of the other, both felt like they were isolated. It was worse for Sasuke, who was living alone in the Uchiha Manor. As for Sakura, her family just didn't satisfy the company she craved.

They saw each other daily, spending time together, talking, training, and hanging out with Naruto. But it never felt like it was enough, and eventually, inescapably, they would have to part ways again and return to their separate houses. If one were to ask how they felt about the situation, Sasuke would say he was fine with it, in a noncommittal way, though he inwardly was feeling bitterness. As for Sakura, she wouldn't say that she was unhappy about it; it was just that she wasn't happy.

They weren't all that far apart, and nobody objected to their relationship, which only a very few people actually knew about. But despite that, things just weren't the same. The beds felt too big on their own, the bathroom was too empty without the other's toothbrushes and shampoos there, and the meals didn't seem to taste the same.

A week had gone by since their return, and while most of the ANBU were up in arms about Tsunade's refusal to punish Sasuke beyond adding some more hours to his community service, things were beginning to settle down. From what Sasuke had heard, even the village Council was beginning to back down; but the only thing he could think of this was: 'about time'. He had had his last 'interview' that morning, and even though he was glad that were none left, he didn't really care about them. He felt listless in recent days, and restless. Team Seven was due for another mission next week, but it almost didn't seem like it was close enough.

He sat on the veranda, staring out over the back yard, which Sakura had so lovingly tended. Flowers were beginning to bloom, and when he closed his eyes, he could smell the sweet scents clearly, and he remembered the time Sakura had first bought fragrant plants. A smile tugged at the corner of his lips, he remembered almost sitting on a

rose bush. But that was months ago, in August. It seemed so far away—even seeing Sakura yesterday seemed like forever ago.

He opened his eyes and looked at the orange colour of the sunset, it was going to be evening soon. If only there was some way that they could live together again. If there could be some reason that would permit that to happen, and nobody could complain about it. There just had to be something he could do, things just didn't flow correctly anymore; adapting was hard.

And then it struck him, in the most overwhelming way possible. He sat bolt upright from his position leaning against the house. He paused, and then ran over possible flaws in the notion, there were very few. It was the only way he could think of, the best way, and he had a feeling that Sakura would agree. He had to propose the idea to her.

It didn't take him long to get there, he knew the way to Sakura's parent's house almost as well as he knew the interior of his own home. He'd made that journey countless times; sometimes if he woke in the middle of the night he would cross town silently and sit on the roof for half an hour or so. He liked to feel the presences of her dormant chakra as she slept. Just the proximity was enough.

When he arrived, he found that Sakura was already sitting on her porch, reading a book in the evening spring light. Excitement had grown inside him as he approached, and now he took a moment, perched on her roof to calm himself, smiling slightly at the plan he'd come up with. He alighted quietly on the deck behind her, and came up beside her, sliding his arms around her and pulling her into his arms.

"Guess who."

Sakura laughed and put her book on her lap, "How many guesses am I allowed to make?"

Sasuke couldn't help himself—he smiled. Things felt right again whenever they were together.

"What's up?" she asked leaning her head back against his shoulder.

"Nothing, really," he answered; he wasn't sure if he should suggest his idea right away, he paused, "You're home alone?"

"Yeah, my mom's out shopping, and my dad's still at work," Sakura answered mellowly.

"And Kanaye?" Sasuke asked—a little surprised that she hadn't mentioned her brother.

Sakura shook her head, "He's in hospital."

Sasuke frowned slightly, "What happened?"

Sakura shifted guiltily, "Well, the day I came home, I confronted him about what he saw. ...I kinda lost my temper."

Sasuke blinked, "Will he be alright?"

He heard Sakura make a guilty noise, "Well, he *will* be okay. The dislocated shoulder and the broken nose have been fixed up. The broken rib, however, could take a little longer to heal."

He shook his head slightly; he knew Kanaye would be alright, which was why he could be amused by the idea. But he, too, still had a little resentment for what Kanaye had revealed. It was likely he jumped to conclusions too, and judging by how Sakura had dealt with it, he had probably said something that had been the last straw for her.

He sat with his cheek resting against her head, letting the breeze sweep over the two of them. He hummed one of his mother's lullabies, but after a few bars he cut himself short, and instead, let his eyes fall shut.

"Describe the sunset for me."

"Alright."

He listened to her paint the sky in his mind with her words, and with her vivid imagery. The sunset she described painted a fuller, more beautiful sunset in his mind than the one that actually existed; it paled by comparison. It was only when she was finished that he opened his eyes again.

"I've thought of a way that would let you move back in with me," Sasuke said quietly when she had finished, "with no complaints, no controversy."

The beauty of her words still hung in the air like a soothing mist, creating a melodious atmosphere. The words just flowed out of his mouth, neither changing the ambiance, nor destroying it. Sakura paused for a moment, drinking in his words. There was a quiet intake of breath, her body tensing slightly from anticipation.

"How?" she breathed, wonder in her voice.

It was simple, really. A soft smile passed over his lips as he spoke his reply against her ear.

"Marry me."

A/N:

Well, guys I hope you liked it—maybe a little clichéd, but I'm not doing the whole wedding bit. Nope. They lived happily ever after, for the most part; imagine your own weddings. :p

This is the last chapter of the story. Shorter than usual, but it *is* an epilogue. Now before you go telling me that there are a couple story flaws, like the fact that Orochimaru showed up in the beginning of the story, but didn't get dealt with as a bad guy, *I already know* . That's what sequels are for. Yep, that's right. **There's going to be a sequel.** *I don't know when it's going to come out* , and the story still

hasn't got a structured storyline yet, but I'm definitely going to get one out preferably sooner rather than later. It'll be shorter than Blind (thankfully), and will have all the bad guys dealt with, and it'll also let you know what happens to Itachi, the remains of our messed up little family.

But , before you go and take this story off your story alerts, here's a reminder: **THERE WILL BE A BONUS CHAPTER OF EXTRAS AFTER THIS** . It'll contain things like explanation of symbolism, some deleted scenes, fun bloopers that my sister, my editor, and I have come up with, etc. So wait for that. ^^ Hopefully it'll be up by next Wednesday. :D

Extras

A/N: Okay. No excuses really. The only part of this that isn't completed is the symbolism section. I was almost finished when I had a computer crash. I'm still trying to recover the old files, but I'll give you what I have. I apologize for the overkill delay with this chapter. I don't mind if you come after me with pitchforks.

Bonus Chapter: Extras

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VII. Information on Sequel

I. Introductory Information:

Blind was started January 31st, 2007, and completed on March 16th, 2009

Number of Pages at the End of Blind: 1009 (my estimate was off by seven pages :p)

Total Word Count: 472 400 (rounded to the nearest hundred; excludes author's notes)

Average number of chapters produced per month: 2.8

I decided to conclude Blind with this chapter of Extras because as I wrote the story, I had lots of fun putting in symbolism and including bits of foreshadowing throughout the story. When I started writing, I was just finishing off my last year in high school and was starting to appreciate the depth of English literature. When I was writing Blind, I was doing my best to include the literary devices I had seen implemented in greater works. But what really bothered me about English literature is that the authors and poets seldom told you straight out what they had intended with their symbolism. (Thinking on it now, it was probably to keep them from getting hanged for treason or something.) But I wanted to share with the readers the finer parts of the story that maybe some of you missed, to emphasize the theme and the meaning I was trying to convey.

Now, just because the story might be considered by some as "deep", and I've revealed the symbolism stuff doesn't mean you can write your English papers on it. While a lot of you complimented the quality of my writing, in my eyes, this isn't legitimate literature—it's still fanfiction.

And even though I'm getting older, I don't think I'll stop writing fanfiction—it's become my hobby, and I figure I'm too good at it (not the best, mind you :P) to quit now. So I hope to see you guys in the future with other stories as well. And I hope you guys enjoy this chapter of extras.

II. Bloopers:

Most of these bloopers arose from sort of hyperness while writing, or while my editor was reading. My editor is one of my closest friends, and she was a great help throughout the story. Though when she gets hyper...let me tell you. XD

Some of these blooper ideas came from my sister while I bounced ideas off of her, even though she is a devoted NaruSaku supporter. She never actually read Blind, but I discussed it so much that she basically understood everything that was going on, and subsequently made fun of it (not meanly, mind you)—creating bloopers. Some of these may be a little obscure and wtf-ish, but I hope you guys find the most of them funny. :3

Chapter 10:

"And besides," she continued after the silence had been laid on a little too thickly, "Wouldn't you like to rebuild your clan here, in Konoha, where the Uchiha originated from? Why bother building it in a place far from here, with no historical value or meaning? You would be a group of Uchiha out in the middle of nowhere, no culture or history—just the Sharingan and a patriarch who betrayed his home. ...In Antarctica, among the penguins!"

(Brief Explanation – my editor imagined the Uchiha Clan 2.0 in Antarctica when Sakura was saying this. :p)

Chapter 45:

Nariko turned the key and then there was that funny little click that meant the door was open; she liked the click, she thought it sounded funny. She turned the key again, and again, locking and unlocking the door.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the door...

Click, click, click, click, click.

"What the hell?" Kisho muttered staring at the door with a dumbfounded expression on his face.

Meanwhile, with Nariko...

Nariko grinned: :3

Chapter 47:

They then got Naruto to blow out all seventeen candles—but he only managed to blow out twelve, meriting a comment from Kiba saying something about a harem of girlfriends. Kiba was then punted off the Hokage tower. Akamaru was not pleased.

Chapter 51:

Sasuke didn't need to see the look of shock on Sakura's face nor the look of anger on Naruto's to know who it was. He whirled around slowly, for once in a long while feeling anxious instead of thrilled upon facing this person. He looked into the red eyes evenly.

"You."

Itachi blinked slowly, "Hand over the weapon, Sasuke, or I will kill your friends."

"I call upon thee in the land of the dead to unleash thy fury of thunder," Sasuke thundered, "Indignation!"

"whut?" Itachi asked blankly, and was promptly zapped to oblivion by a lightning bolt.

(Tales of Symponia reference)

Chapter 53:

"Let go of your hatred, and embrace the love around you," his mother (who was secretly Oma Desala) said tenderly, "Only then will you find the true path to enlightenment."

Sasuke stared at her blankly.

(Stargate Reference)

Chapter 56:

To kill Itachi, or not to kill Itachi? To be or not to be? Sasuke pondered this deeply, a troubled look on his brow. He pulled a skull out of his kunai pouch.

Yugito stared, "What the hell?"

(Reference to William Shakespeare's Hamlet.)

Chapter 57:

"Hinata-chan, you are the person I care about most in the world—I could never love anyone else after loving you," Naruto said giving her a sneeze.

"Ew, you just sneezed all over me!" Hinata exclaimed with revulsion.

(I mistyped, and only found it when re-reading. :p)

He recalled his earlier imagined picture of Sakura, and made adjustments to it, committing her face to memory yet again. He adjusted the hue of her hair, and the detail of her eyes. The facial structure was the same, but he added the subtle pink hue to her cheeks in his mind, liking it better when there was a slight blush on her face. And then, a frown came to his face; a blemish was added to the image against his will.

"You have a zit on his nose," he told her.

Her face blanched, "Oh...you noticed."

(My dear sister's contribution.)

Chapter 61:

"Yes, I know the man you speak of—I know him as Ryuuzaki, some know him as L," her father replied, "Why do you ask?"

(Death Note Reference)

"I was originally going to send Tobi and Deidara to retrieve it, but due to unspecified circumstances, I will be sending you two instead," Pain continued, folding his hands.

"Unspecified circumstances?" Kisame asked.

"Fine, I need Tobi here so I can plot evil with him," Pain snapped, "As for Deidara...well...uh...he can't take care of himself at all. ...Even if he is armed to the teeth with...bombs...and explosives...and has a giant bird...yeah, he just can't take care of himself."

Itachi and Kisame exchanged weird looks.

Chapter 63:

She let out a delighted squeal and ran across the room, leaping on one of the two beds, bouncing up and down on the white linen. The bed she had chosen to bounce on was a pull out couch. And no sooner had she landed on it, it promptly closed on her. And then Nariko exploded.

Konan blinked, "Whut?"

Chapter 67:

Her feet took her down the path, the moonlight spilling on the road, illuminating it for her. It was a full moon now, and the silvery light shone clearly, unobstructed by clouds. The gate disappeared from view behind her when she rounded the bend, and it was only then when she heard the quiet tapping of sandals on cobblestone. Sakura heard the approaching footsteps with a sinking feeling; those footsteps could belong to anyone, but she was certain it was him.

"Hey watcha doin' ou'here sho late a' night, Shakura...?" a drunken Jiraiya stumbled into view.

Chapter 69:

Sasuke fixed his brother with a mistrustful look. "Where are your teammates?" he asked.

Itachi closed his eyes in contemplation, "Off talking about what women talk about."

"Oh, and what to women talk about?" Sasuke asked, narrowing his eyes.

Meanwhile...

Konan tilted her head to the side, pondering, "You see, Nariko, when a man and woman love each other very much..."

And another...

Sasuke paused and perched on a branch in the trees, grasping a limb tightly. There was a random field of flowers below, and two women in Akatsuki robes could be seen sitting there, weaving headdresses out of flowers. It seemed that the man on the ferry was completely useless and had directed him not to Itachi but to his two teammates. Sasuke leapt down from his perch and before the two women, drawing himself up to his full height. Both of them looked at him, the shorter of the two had a wreath of flowers placed lopsidedly on her head.

"Where is Itachi?" he asked menacingly.

"Omg! You're Itachi-sama's brother!" the girl exclaimed, leaping to her feet, the wreath dangling precariously.

"Wait! You're that girl that Naruto crashed into in that one town!" Sasuke exclaimed back, pointing at her in a dramatic and out of character manner; and then he regained himself: "Where is Itachi?"

The girl pointed in a nebulous direction, "That way!"

The other woman acked.

(Another contribution by my dear sister.)

Chapter 71:

[Sasuke] 100% hp "Are you alright?" Sasuke asked, pausing.

[Sakura] (status): Poisoned; 10% hp She shook her head, "I'm okay...just a bit tired. We're almost there right?"

[Sakura] (status): Poisoned; -15% hp

[INFO] Sakura suddenly falls down, dead!

[INFO] Title Screen: "Game over! You let the love of your life die! Oh no! Would you like to save and try again?"

[Sasuke] Sasuke's eyes grew wide: "O_O!"

III. Random Information: In No Particular Order

I wrote Blind mostly to make a point on love and forgiveness, not so much for SasuSaku. I was struck by how angry a person Sasuke was, and how much hatred he had. I wrote Blind to make a point on how love and forgiveness can change a person and give them happiness. Sasuke deserves a much better life than the one he has in the manga, but he can't get it because he's just so hell-bent on vengeance. The best way I could see Sasuke finding his own happy ending is to take away his power and put him in a situation where love can resolve the issue. SasuSaku has always been my favourite Naruto pairing, but I wanted the story to be more than that. Maybe that's partially why Blind is so much more popular than I thought it would be—because it's not just the SasuSaku, it's more? I'm not sure I can be the judge of that, as the writer. :p

The reason I refer to Tobi and Madara as two separate people is because in this story, they sort of are. I wrote it following the Tobi is Obito theory. Obito was crushed by a large rock in the manga, and that would lead to obvious brain damage (it's a miracle he would have survived), which would explain Tobi's goofy behaviour. As for Madara, I believe that in some way or another, he possessed Obito's body for some reason or another (probably out of desperation). In Blind, Tobi is Obito's brain-damaged personality, while Madara is Madara in Tobi's body. Madara can't keep very good control over a mind that doesn't work properly, so he frequently loses control and Tobi emerges. But when he does regain control, that's when we get the Madara evilness happening. In essence (in Blind, that is), he's two different people in one body. So that is why I refer to him as two separate people.

My editor has decided Nariko is combustible. This was spawned when she read Chapter 63, and was very hyper. At random intervals she would suddenly say: "And then Nariko walked in and exploded." Good times. We've decided this is how to solve world issues. Example: The UN is arguing on some horrible issue and can't agree on anything. The answer? Send Nariko in and let her explode, and that'll fix everything! :D Or: in another series, all the protagonists are surrounded by goons and have no means to escape! Just insert Nariko and let her explode. Problem solved. No more goons, no more anybody. XD

True but little known fact: after updating a chapter that I feared would spark some sort of negative reactions from some readers, I'd avoid my email for days. XD This did not help my schoolwork sometimes... and some members of group projects found it frustrating.

I am currently going through all of Blind and removing all unnecessary Japanese phrases. When I started writing, I had just finished watching the series in full, and I was having trouble imagining them speaking in English. Hence the occasional Japanese phrase. But, now that the only sub group I get Naruto subs from has quit subbing Naruto (for legal reasons), I'm reading the manga only.

Hence, when I re-read earlier chapters, I cringe at the Japanese. I'm still going to be keeping words though—like *dobe*, and the occasional 'hai'. But gods. I can't believe how much I initially used. O_O

List of people who *didn't* die in Blind, but who died in the Manga:

Yugito

Jiraiya

Kakashi (albeit temporarily)

Shizune (albeit temporarily)

Itachi

Asuma

Many people asked me whether or not I would keep Itachi with the current manga or if I would keep him evil. The thing was, when I started writing Blind I detested Itachi for what he did to Sasuke. There seemed to be no viable, acceptable reason why *anyone* would do what he did to a *child*. So in my mind, he was formed from the mold of evil. The manga was suggesting it pretty strongly as well, and so for all intents and purposes, I was going to keep him evil throughout the fic. But you see, the person I have the most Narutardly discussions with is my editor, and we had got into theorizing the whole Itachi scenario. She has this amazing habit of picking up on the subtlest of hints, and she told me that something was wrong with Itachi's character in the manga. She said that something didn't feel right—the big brother Itachi seemed different than Akatsuki Itachi, and it seemed like they were almost two different people. She said she was convinced that he was good at heart, though she couldn't figure out how it would work. Luckily for me, I listen to my editor. So, while in Blind Itachi was headed straight down the villain path, I began plotting a means by which it would be possible for him to be good, in the event my editor was right. By that

point we'd pretty much decided that everything could be blamed on Uchiha Madara, though by all rights he should have been dead ages ago. We had nothing on him aside from what the Kyuubi told Sasuke when you meet him for the first time after the time-skip. But because we figured it was all Madara's fault, one way or another, I started throwing in hints that Itachi's thoughts were suppressed by Madara. It became especially easier after Tobi was revealed to be Madara. Eventually, everything panned out according to my editor, and Blind's plot became valid, even more so than I thought it would be. I totally made an off-comment in the middle of the story about there being a hide-out in the Rain Country, and two weeks later, we find out it is Akatsuki-central. Go figure.

A few people have asked me this: "Have you read every single review you've ever received?" The answer is yes. I have read every single review. Sometimes when there are over eighty emails in my inbox, I still read them all. Thanks for all the support. ^^

VI. Deleted Scenes:

The deleted scenes consist mostly of stuff that I wanted to put in the story, but never got around to. Or stuff that was in the story but didn't fit properly, so I cut it out. There aren't very many because the earlier stuff that I decided not to include, never got to the written stage, and I've forgotten most of it. But below are the few snippets of what I do remember, or what did make it into writing and has been pulled out.

When I look at you...

...I don't know why...but I want to cry...

There's just this...overwhelming presence of sadness...sadness that has never been shed in the form of tears...and you let it stay, you don't let it go...

So I want to cry for you, to try and release the sadness that hangs about you like a shroud.

You've suffered...You don't have to tell me now, I can tell without asking.

And I'd do anything to take part of your burden away... because no one deserves happiness more than you do.

"What are you saying?"

I don't know...maybe that... I love you?

Share with me...Share with me, Sasuke, the sorrows that you haul around in your heart. Shed your sorrows, my heart will take them from you.

My heart will be strong for you when you are weak. I will be your eyes for you when you are blind, and your ears when you are deaf to the world.

"Why?" he asked breathlessly—quietly, the words seeming almost afraid to escape from his lips.

Do you really need to ask...?

Because I love you.

Something I wrote on a rainy day. It could seriously be from any SasuSaku drabble I've written, but when I wrote it, I had a Blind mindset going. Even if it is written in a totally different tense from the story. It's kind of weird in that it's written like it's Sakura's thoughts going on, but then Sasuke is responding to them like he can hear them. I still like the way it sounds in my head though.

"Are you alright?" Sasuke asked, pausing.

She shook her head, "I'm okay...just a bit tired. We're almost there, right?"

He studied her for a moment, and then came to a complete halt, "I can carry you."

She was almost unsure if she'd heard correctly, "Are you sure?"

He smirked at her slightly. "We're almost there, right?" he mimicked, and then without waiting for consent, he picked her up in his arms anyways.

This was supposed to be inserted during the part where Sakura and Sasuke cross the threshold of the Konoha gates. I had initially imagined in my head that he would carry her up until they reached the gates, but two things stopped me: 1) Cliché. By now, you should all know I don't do clichés in a normal way. I either do them uniquely, or break them. 2) That's an awfully far distance to carry someone. And even if Sakura hadn't been eating properly, it's too short of an amount of time to lose enough weight to be described as "light in his arms." That, and it would be weird to describe him putting her down at the village gates.

"It seems like you are always crying because of me," he said quietly, wiping a tear away with his thumb.

"No, I'm crying for you," she stated angrily, fury amid her tears.

This was a bit of conversation that popped into my head during the Sakura-depression bit. As you can see it would fit well with the situation, but sadly, I could not find a home for it in which it would fit best. Thusly, I never got to add it in. Though I think it really emphasizes some of the reasons for Sakura's tears.

For those of you who were with this story waaaaaaaayyyy back. Do you remember vaguely how I mentioned that Sakura was going to get embossed photos made of Sasuke's family? That I suppose is a deleted scene, though I never got around to actually typing out that segment. I decided that the embossed photos were going to be irrelevant, since Sasuke's vision started returning while on the mission anyways, and I cut them out entirely. As you can tell removing the idea of embossed photos had no impact on the story whatsoever.

"Thank you."

"Anytime," she smiled.

There was a pause of silence between them. They were just content to sit like that: close, together, lovingly. It was after a while that Sasuke broke the silence again.

"Sakura?"

"Mmm-hmm?"

This segment of conversation was inserted between Sakura's description of the sunset, and Sasuke telling her he had an idea for them to move in together again. Upon rereading the epilogue three weeks before it would be posted, I decided that it seemed to ruin the atmosphere I was trying to create, and that the way I wrote it flowed better. Though, because of the mundane-ness of this scene, it could almost be stuck anywhere. I think the plainness of the words was what made me feel it destroyed the atmosphere.

She was so light in his arms, her thinning frame no heavier than a feather. Her head rested gently on his shoulder, the petal-pink tresses falling in front of her eyes, and she sighed slightly in her sleeping state. There was no one the in proximity of his senses, so he risked brushing a kiss on top of her head. Itachi may no longer be a threat, but there were others who could use her against him. But his worries were not for himself—but rather, for her.

He made sure that she was securely in his arms before walking onward towards Konoha—towards home.

Again, this had to do with my visions of Sasuke carrying Sakura home to Konoha, but as I mentioned earlier, ten days isn't enough time to get as sickly and unhealthy as she's described here. So this was cut even before it had a placement.

Sometimes Nariko couldn't sleep. Sometimes she found it very hard to even pretend to sleep, because behind her eyes she would see horrible things. She had not let the demon go, and it was already the third month into the year. The longer she kept it, the more it fought against her, and the longer and harder it fought, the more horrors she saw.

At the beginning of the New Year, it had started with the occasional nightmare. She had had them before, but now they were more vivid. By mid-January, they were becoming more frequent. By February, she had them at least three times a week, and she began to experience more than just horrible images. By mid-February, she could smell burnt flesh and taste blood in her dreams. In the middle of the night she would wake up, and the first thing she would do would be to stare at her hands, looking for blood.

The demon always had the best influence over her while she slept, and when she woke, as its grip quickly faded, she would hear its laughter.

This I started writing in the middle of my comp sci class because I was really bored, and stuck with what I was going to do with Blind. But because it contradicted the fact that I said earlier in the story that Nariko was always tormented by the demon at night, it got cut. I'm not sure if I miss it or not.

She had seen him at his weakest, seen him afraid. She was always there for him, by his side, watching out for him. She tried to understand him even if she couldn't begin to understand, and she helped him when she could, even if there was nothing that she *could* do.

She had always helped and supported him for as long as he could remember. She gave everything for him and saved nothing for herself. And he realized that he loved her.

And he was afraid.

A segment I found on the very last page of my first Blind notebook. It was supposed to go near the end, but it had no home. Oh well.

V. Symbolism:

i. Chapter Titles:

Chapter One: Blackness and Darkness:

The blackness refers to Sakura's clothes, while darkness to Sasuke's blindness.

Chapter Two: Beneath the Blossoming Cherry Tree:

When one sits beneath a tree, it's usually for shade or shelter or something along those lines. It was intended as a foreshadowing of Sakura taking care of Sasuke

Chapter Three: An Offer:

None really. Sometimes I name the chapter after the biggest highlight. The offer put forth to Sasuke was that highlight in this chapter.

Chapter Four: The Unforgotten Memory:

Amid all the talk of Sasuke having his memory erased by Orochimaru, he remembers that Sakura told him she loves him, which is why she was healing him. Again, it is the most important highlight of the chapter.

Chapter Five: A Curse of Damaged Dignity:

Not overly symbolic, just references to Sasuke's curse mark, and a reference to the humiliation Sakura put him through. (grin)

Chapter Six: Mismatched Pieces of a Puzzle:

Refers to Ino and Shikamaru's confusion on Sakura's behaviour as our favourite pink-haired kunoichi sneakily runs errands around Konoha like a ninja.

Chapter Seven: Of Trust, Spilled Secrets, and Other Things:

Sasuke admits he is willing to trust Sakura, while Naruto drops the ball by letting everyone know Sasuke's returned to Konoha.

Chapter Eight: A Crafty Intruder, and an Interfering Instructor:

Refers to these persons respectively: Ino tries to break into Sasuke's room, but is foiled by Kakashi.

Chapter Nine: The Shoehorn, the Kunai, and Hot Chocolate:

Since this chapter had no unifying event, I named it after the most random objects that appeared in this chapter.

Chapter Ten: Confrontation and Homecoming:

None really. Sakura confronts Ino, and then later talks with Sasuke about how he's home again.

Chapter Eleven: Those Who are Cursed

Refers to the conversation held between the only two people in Konoha who are cursed by Orochimaru.

Chapter Twelve: Lectures:

None really. In addition to highlighting a certain event in a chapter, I also name chapters things that can sum up all events nicely. The whole chapter was practically composed of lectures. XD

Chapter Thirteen: Juxtaposition:

A juxtaposition is a comparison of two things that have something in common but are complete opposites. I did an art project where I put

an image of a fawn and a wolf cub next to one another; they are both innocent and adorable, but when they grow up, the other will hunt the first. The juxtaposition in this chapter is between Itachi and Kanaye. They both are brothers, however, Kanaye ended up a much different brother to Sakura, than Itachi was to Sasuke.

Chapter Fourteen: Ice Cube:

This title is meant to deliberately point out the ice in Sasuke's lemonade, which is symbolic in this chapter. See the different iconic symbols section for further detail on the ice cube.

Chapter Fifteen: Nightmare:

Highlight of this chapter: Sasuke's horrific nightmare.

Chapter Sixteen: The Dawn and Dusk:

The dawn, of course, indicates our beloved Akatsuki, while the dusk refers to Sakura's first description of the sunset to Sasuke

Chapter Seventeen: Genjutsu:

Very basic. Genjutsu is mentioned a lot in this chapter.

Chapter Eighteen: Trial:

Sakura's going to teach Sasuke something new, if he can pass her ultimate test: beating up on children. XD (coughHyuugalkanecough)

Chapter Nineteen: A Red Petal on the White Rose:

According to my symbolism book (my best friend in the form of a book), in the language of flowers, white roses are often symbols of unrealized love. Now red roses are pretty universal symbols of love. This is the first time Sasuke feels that "unexplainable emotion" that he feels. The white rose is his love for her, and the red petal is the emotion. It's also foreshadowing to when he finally realizes he's fallen in love with Sakura.

Chapter Twenty: Dinnertime:

The highlight of the evening: a Haruno Kisho vs. Uchiha Sasuke fiasco.

Chapter Twenty-One: Illusion:

The vivid dream Sasuke wakes him, and in a state of panic, he thinks Itachi is in the house. Illusion refers to this illusion Sasuke created out of his own fears.

Chapter Twenty-Two: On Hatred:

Sasuke and Sakura discuss hatred. No symbolic meanings there.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Genjutsu Revisited:

More discussions on genjutsu, which ate up most of the chapter.

Chapter Twenty-Four: Prodigy and the Prodigal Son:

Possibly one of my favourite chapter titles. The prodigy of course being Neji, and the prodigal son being Sasuke. Now if you don't know the story of the prodigal son, then you obviously haven't read a Bible recently. Wikipedia "Parable of the Prodigal Son" and the overview sums it up nicely. Sasuke is quite the prodigal son, even if he didn't come back of his own free will. :3

Chapter Twenty-Five: Clarity:

Where everything becomes clearer! :o Lol, no. Better explanation: Sasuke fine-tunes his chakra senses while Sakura begins to work around the mystery of his blindness. In a sense, this clarity of his chakra senses is foreshadowing to the return of his sight.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Traces of Self-Sacrifice:

There are indications of self-sacrifice throughout the chapter. Konan sacrificing her time to watch Nariko, Sakura sacrificing her physical

well-being for Sasuke, Sasuke refusing to be treated on the behalf of Sakura's health. Yeah.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: The Bastardly Bastard of a Client:

I'm creative. :3 (Translation: No symbolic meaning at all. XD)

Chapter Twenty-Eight: The First Indications of Trouble:

Again, no symbolic meaning. The title speaks on behalf of the chapter.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: In the Lion's Den:

Metaphoric here, not symbolic. Team Seven and our beloved Tokugawa Manzo are staying in a town that's basically an Oto outpost. Aw damn.

Chapter Thirty: Confessions, Mistakes, and Deceptions:

Again, highlights the parts of the chapter. Sasuke confesses he was a traitor, the mistake being he walked in on Sakura while she was washing at the river, and the deception being Deidara and Konan being nice to Nariko despite the fact that they are going to kill her.

Chapter Thrity-One: Cornered:

Metaphorical again. Team Seven and Tokugawa are caught by Oto nin, and thus separated.

Chapter Thirty-Two: An Awkward Situation:

The Teahouse Incident. The title sums it up nicely.

Chapter Thirty-Three: In Cold Blood:

Sasuke and Sakura discuss the ramifications of killing in cold blood. Foreshadowing to Sasuke's cruel mercy on Itachi.

Chapter Thirty-Four: The Value of Exchange:

No real symbolic meaning. Sasuke's worth something to Kumo, and thus to Orochimaru, that's all.

Chapter Thirty-Five: Fragility:

Pointing directly to the line: "creates a world of fragile things". See the symbolism covered in this chapter to get a better description

Chapter Thirty-Six: Slipping Between Fingers:

Sasuke makes a narrow escape from being arrested. Metaphorical again.

Chapter Thirty-Seven: The Last Peaceful Slumber:

Refers to the last night of good sleep Sakura gets for a while because she finds out that her father is missing the next day.

Chapter Thirty-Eight: The Broken Mug:

Points directly at the mug Sakura' breaks. See the symbolism for this chapter to get a better explanation.

Chapter Thirty-Nine: Perspective:

Sakura talks about putting things in perspective. Nothing overly special about this title.

Chapter Forty: The Beginnings of Realization:

The look the Shichibi's host gives Nariko gives her an inner inkling of her fate. Title is foreshadowing to the next chapter.

Chapter Forty-One: Fateful Choices:

Again, highlighting chapter events. Choices are made, things decided, no hum.

Chapter Forty-Two: An Overdose on Chocolate:

Did you *realize* how much chocolate Ino was giving Sakura?
Chocolate: the best remedy for angst, imo.

Chapter Forty-Three: Walking Around with Your Eyes Closed:

Points directly to a line Sakura says which is deeply metaphorical.
Which see in in-depth chapter symbolism section.

Chapter Forty-Four: Fear and Irritation:

Again, a title that best suits things covered in the chapter. Sakura's apprehensive about seeking help for her depression. Konan's irritated with Pain. Nariko's nervous around Sakura's daddy.

Chapter Forty-Five: The Tainted Daisy:

The daisy is symbolic of Nariko, and Nariko spends a lot of time in this chapter working on a paper daisy. See in-depth section for more info.

Chapter Forty-Six: Hard Knox:

A.k.a.: the University of Life. Translation: Life gave you lemons, and you really kept screwing up until you learned how to make lemonade. This title refers to Kakashi's past. He's been down that road before, doesn't want Sasuke to follow.

Chapter Forty-Seven: Festival Lights:

I imagine bright coloured lights against a dark sky. Just kind of highlights the touching ending of this chapter.

Chapter Forty-Eight: The One Word:

"Congratulations."

Chapter Forty-Nine: Snapshots:

The epically long New Year's chapter. I did segments of almost every pairing hinted at in this story, each one having a little event happen to them. It doesn't progress the plot that much, but it's a cute insert.

^^

Chapter Fifty: The Written Exam:

Sasuke writes a paper. Yay! And this title completely masks the happenings of the tenth question. Oooh! A shroud of mysteriousness!

Chapter Fifty-One: Teammates:

Sasuke meets his new, temporary teammates. Nothing else special.

Chapter Fifty-Two: The Forest of Death:

Introduction to the setting of the chapter.

Chapter Fifty-Three: Nekomata:

It just *fit* .

Chapter Fifty-Four: Shards of Truth:

Bits and pieces of actuality start appearing. Itachi starts to suspect that Nariko is self-harming herself, which is true. Madara also reveals parts of his intentions, which is another piece of truth. Things are starting to come together.

Chapter Fifty-Five: Pride:

Talking about pride. Meant to highlight the fact that if Sasuke doesn't lose his pride, he'll lose more in the long run.

Chapter Fifty-Six: Forming the Ties that Bind:

Sai climbs his way to forming bonds. And even though they don't say it, Sasuke and Yugito have grown attached to that socially clueless

idiot. ^^

Chapter Fifty-Seven: Bright Candy Colours:

This title presents the idea of a situation completely opposite to what happened in the chapter. It sounds light and happy, but it's dark and grim. Kinda the same idea when you see porcelain dolls and merry-go-rounds in horror films. The candies used are actually used as an excuse to fall out a window. Grim.

Chapter Fifty-Eight: The Rules of Engagement:

I just realized how most of the Chuunin Exam chapter-titles really suck. Ones directly talking about the exam are flat and have no symbolic or metaphoric meaning. They just state what happens in the chapter, like this one. Fail.

Chapter Fifty-Nine: Erratic:

Because I used the word "erratic" at least once in each scene of this chapter. Kind of a hectic chapter, so erratic fits.

Chapter Sixty: Sasuke's Decision:

When Sasuke officially decides that he's going to blind Itachi. Though of course I string you along forever, making you think he's going to kill him still. I stopped saying "kill Itachi" after this chapter. It becomes "eliminate" or "deal with", etc. It gives the same impression, but it doesn't actually say Sasuke's going to kill him anymore.

Chapter Sixty-One: Misunderstanding:

Sakura has a misunderstanding when Sasuke doesn't come home. Kanaye misunderstands his sister's feelings. Nobody understands anyone. D:

Chapter Sixty-Two: Stepping Forwards and Falling Back:

A step forwards for Akatsuki. A setback for Sasuke. Kinda sucks to be blind again, doesn't it? Yeah, just a little.

Chapter Sixty-Three: The Unanswerable Question:

Sasuke knows, but he doesn't.

Chapter Sixty-Four: Encounter:

The second crossing of the two worlds. This is sort of a leading up to the part where Sasuke crosses the two worlds for a third time: when he takes revenge against Itachi.

Chapter Sixty-Five: Uh-oh:

I couldn't think of anything. It sums up everyone's thoughts very well though. The shit hit the fan. :3

Chapter Sixty-Six: A Simple Gift:

Because even though it didn't cost anything, it had more value than any other gift Sasuke could have given. Thus simple, but not.

Chapter Sixty-Seven: You're Annoying:

Nobody seems to get this. Every time Sasuke says: "You're annoying" he's saying: "I love you." A la the Princess Bride—except I didn't steal it from there. No, I thought that the first time Sasuke left in the manga. He didn't dislike Sakura anymore, but he still called her annoying. This is why: it's his "I love you". He doesn't even have to realize he's in love with her to say it. Every time in this story when he calls her annoying, it can be translated as "I love you". Even at the beginning, even when he didn't. It's *because* he loves her he calls her annoying, even if he didn't love her yet in the beginning.

Chapter Sixty-Eight: Faith:

Sakura places faith in Sasuke. Even when nobody else does.

Chapter Sixty-Nine: Cruel Mercy:

Because living is better than dying: you can do something with your life no matter your condition, as long as you're alive. If you're dead, you can't do anything, nothing. Nothing is nothing. (Unless you're Sasuke's mommy, and have a demon cat friend, but that's not the point.) Sasuke is merciful by not killing Itachi, giving him a chance to live life still. But he also wants to make sure that he can't do any harm while he lives. Thus the cruelty part. See in-depth section for a more thorough discussion.

Chapter Seventy: A Fool's Death:

In the chapter where you first meet Nariko, Itachi thinks her a fool. She is a fool who will die a fool's death. Nariko dies, but he realizes it's far from a fool's death.

Chapter Seventy-One: The Return:

A dual return: Sasuke and Sakura to Konoha, and Nariko to her hometown.

Chapter Seventy-Two: Crossing the Line:

Even if the line is blurred, you can still tell when you're distinctly on the other side of it. Sasuke and Sakura both crossed the line between friendship and love, knowing truly where they lie. Kanaye's not to pleased that lying on the love side of the line means lying next to each other. 3

ii. In-Depth: Symbolism Within Chapters:

Chapter Five:

Rosebay bush Sasuke falls into: Rosebay (a.k.a. oleander) means danger, or beware in the flower language. Without Sakura's help Sasuke will fall into danger on his own. When Sakura helps him out

of the bush, it shows that she will help him get out of it, should he fall into it.

Patch of Canary Grass Sakura avoids stepping on: Canary grass apparently in flower language represents perseverance—by stepping on the grass, she would ruin it, but by keeping it intact, it represents that she will persevere.

Sasuke's curse mark: Sasuke's curse mark, or moreover, the sealing of it is a deep (admittedly unintended) symbol. It was my editor who pointed out the parallel, and I was amazed. When Sasuke's curse mark is permanently sealed by Tsunade, it also corresponds with his permanent wish to kill Itachi. Later, in chapter sixty-nine, the curse seal breaks under the strain of trying to escape Tsukiyomi. Tsukiyomi is the embodiment of that hatred, and breaking free from it symbolized the escape Sasuke made from his hatred. At the same time, he broke something that was supposed to be permanent—the seal. While at the same time, his desire to kill Itachi evaporates entirely—another thing that was permanent, was broken. Sasuke then relies on the seal Kakashi put on him, one that only works if he wishes it to—this seal differs symbolically in that it was used to save Sasuke from the power of the curse mark. This seal prevents the use of the curse mark based on Sasuke's will alone. Similarly, Sasuke's hatred for Itachi will only return if he wills it to return.

Chapter Six:

Sasuke's reflection on his curse mark: Again another link to the curse mark symbol. He had sworn only to use it to kill Itachi, but when the seal broke, he did not use it to take Itachi's life.

Chapter Eight:

Sasuke's request: Not symbolic, but there was a bit of confusion about what Sasuke asked of Sakura. He asked her if she would tell Naruto what happened to him before he got to visit. Having her tell Naruto is Sasuke's way of avoiding revealing it himself—and he wouldn't ask if he didn't trust her.

Chapter Nine:

Uchiha Fugaku's Kunai: This object isn't so much symbolic as it is a recurring theme throughout the story. It is more a representation of the past—Sakura clings to it during her depression, using it to keep in mind what happened to Sasuke's clan. And Itachi recognizes it for its significance as Sasuke holds it up to him. It also plays a bit with irony when Sasuke blinds Itachi. Itachi killed the clan, and now the past has come and bitten him back.

Uchiha Mitoko's sheet music: another recurring theme, and another representation of the past. Like the kunai, it's woven throughout the story, though it occurs more often. It represents another piece of a happy past, as it comforts Sasuke in his dark moments. Again it plays an ironic role when Sasuke plays it endlessly in Itachi's head as a genjutsu. Another way in which the past comes back to torment Itachi. As my editor put it, in a distressing tone: "That was unkind!"

Sakura's mother having no name: This is totally un-symbolic and completely unintentional. Usually it would symbolize that she's expendable, but in this case, I just never managed to give her a name that fit. I only gave Sakura's father a name because it was unavoidable. :x

Chapter Ten:

Sasuke's headband: It is symbolic of Sasuke's allegiance to Konoha. When he accepts it, on a symbolic level he's also decided he is going to swear by Konoha again. He wears it with pride throughout the story, and it also enforces his promise to return to Konoha at the end, because he is wearing it as he leaves, unlike in the manga. The scratch is also important in that in a backwards sort of way, it represents the bond between him and Naruto. Refusing to receive a new headband is how he reminds himself of what happens, and keeps in mind the importance of his friendship with Naruto.

Chapter Eleven:

Tsunade and Anko's discussion on the Bijuu: Or more specifically, Tsunade's statement: "Wouldn't it be ironic if the power of [the six-tailed weasel] was bestowed upon Itachi?" Tsunade's going under the assumption that with the Bijuu, they're going to distribute them throughout Akatsuki's members. Here, it's heavy foreshadowing. It's practically a spoiler, though you don't realize that until you get to the part in the story where it actually happens.

Chapter Twelve:

Naruto's comment: about Sakura's luggage seeming to indicate she's going to move in for good = more foreshadowing

The key under the shingle: Not particularly symbolic. It's more of an important item in the story that seems insignificant now. Kanaye remembers it, and that's how he makes his incursion in the epilogue.

Chapter Fourteen:

The Moon: Right at the beginning of the chapter, right with the first descriptions of Itachi's appearances, you'll see the moon: described as orange and mask like. The moon is hanging over where Itachi is positioned, as if it's watching over him, right? This ended up being unintentional foreshadowing to Madara's control over Itachi. As nobody knew that Tobi was Madara, I couldn't have written this chapter with symbolism pointed in that direction. However, rereading it, it makes scary amounts of sense. O_O

The squishing sound of the mud: These are the first indications that Itachi regrets killing the clan, though his thoughts conflict with the regret he feels. This is also the first indication that Madara is controlling this thoughts by suppressing his mind with the Sharingan.

Nariko: Particularly here, in this chapter, Nariko parallels Itachi's thoughts towards Sasuke. His suppressed thoughts towards his brother make him think of contempt, the same feeling he feels towards Nariko. But as the story progresses, and Itachi's thoughts start to evolve and slowly change underneath the layer of Madara's

control. He starts to grow attached to Nariko and at the same time, he begins to subconsciously remember the truth about how he feels about his little brother.

The ice cube: So deeply symbolic! Particularly in the sentences I've used to describe it. The ice cube symbolizes Sasuke's detachment and icy nature towards others. He won't let others in. But as the chapter continues and the dialogue goes on, the ice cube begins to melt in Sasuke's mouth. To quote: "He let it slowly melt in his mouth, the frozen water thawing slowly as time ticked by ." The underlined section particularly indicates this. Another quote: "...he stated indignantly, the ice cube getting in the way of his tongue and slurring the words slightly ." This indicates his frigidness to others prevents him from properly conveying how he feels. As the dialogue continues, it doesn't impede his speech much, further indicating that the more he warms up to others, the easier he can talk to and trust them. Quote: "The ice cube in his mouth was no larger than a sliver on his tongue and it slowly melted away, becoming no more than a trickle of water ." Water is a representation of life and sustenance—we've all learned in science class that without water, there would be no life. Having said that, when the ice cube melts, it symbolizes and foreshadows how that Sasuke's cold and distant nature is converted to something nourishing. The melting of the ice cube in the chapter is also followed by Sasuke's version of 'I love you': 'You're annoying.' Here ends the symbolism on the ice cube.

Chapter Sixteen:

Training Ground Three: This location is important in that it is the location of the infamous bells challenge Kakashi went through with Team Seven. Thusly, all important training events happen at Training Ground Three in Blind, simply because it—in a way—represents that things from the past persevere to the present: some things never change.

Sakura's Description of the Sunset: Particularly the line: "As I look at you now, the light patterns shift over your face and dispel the shadows, seeming to fade into them and eradicate them." Under

Sakura's watch, the darkness in Sasuke's heart begins to fade and disappear. Also the lines: " "The first star has appeared in the southwestern sky, shining like a shard of the purest crystal; the moon is nowhere to be seen." She finished off her description, while gazing out at the river, watching the lone star tumble over the waves of the ultramarine surface, disappearing and reappearing from view." Stars typically represent the spirit, and the forces of that spirit struggling against evil. As the star disappears and reappears on the water, it foreshadows Sasuke's inner struggle of whether or not he will kill Itachi.

Sakura's inward promise: Of never letting Sasuke leave again like that. Foreshadowing again.

Chapter Seventeen:

Sakura's Illusion: Namely the line: "As much as you might want believe that you can see this, you can't forget how things really are. Don't lose yourself to an illusion." This is sort of implying that things aren't always what they seem in respect of the clan. This was going off my editor's prediction that Itachi was good and had a good reason for massacring the Uchiha Clan. This line implies that Sasuke shouldn't get lost in only what he knows but search for the truth. Sasuke doesn't find out the truth about the Uchiha Massacre until the sequel, but he does manage to overcome the desire to kill his brother, which is a result of what Sasuke perceives as true about the Uchiha clan.

Chapter Eighteen:

The walk back to the village: Holy crap, there's a whole lot of symbolism here. Okay starting with this quote: "Sasuke was getting by the rough patches easily, having grown accustomed to various surfaces. It had been worse when they had first come down this path, having almost fallen a number of times on the rough parts, but she was always there to make sure that he didn't actually fall." The path of course represents the course of their lives. The rough patches on this path are the rough patches in life. Sasuke is growing

accustomed to these rough patches—i.e. Sasuke's suffered so much he's gotten used to it. The first time on the path refers to the now—as in the second time would be when they're married down the road.

Sasuke stumbles on the rough patches of life—a.k.a. his blindness—and Sakura supports him, or makes sure that he doesn't 'fall down'.

Computer failure here. Missing symbolism due to computer crash.

Snake and the Weasel: Now for some of you symbolism buffs. You're probably thinking: "wait, if this implies what I think it implies, it never happened!" Well, you're right. It didn't. This is foreshadowing to the sequel, and as such, I'm not going to reveal what it means, or else it'll have major, major spoilers for the climax of the sequel. But very few people actually guessed correctly about the symbolism, so I'll just leave you happily confused. :D

Lock and key to the Uchiha Manor: Okay, this was another unintentional symbol, until one of my readers said that it was her favourite one. And then instant she mentioned it, I noticed it right away too. The manor is like Sasuke's heart, and it's protected by a gate. Nobody else could get into that manor while Sasuke was gone, and the key had gone missing some time ago. But now that Sasuke's returned, there's a new lock and key for the gate, but still, not just anyone can get it. Sasuke of course is the owner, but the only spare key to get in, is owned by Sakura.

Chapter Twenty:

Roses: The whole symbolism on the roses is pretty obvious. They are symbols of Sasuke and Sakura's souls. The pink rose and the black rose. Sakura's pink rose is the soft gentle spirit she has while Sasuke's black rose represents the deadness of his soul as a result of the horrors he's been through. Sasuke's suggestion that pink is delicate also indicates that Sakura, despite her maturation with time, still has a soft spot that is both her weakness and her strength: her love for him. Also, Sasuke's analogy of the red roses turn black when

they die is an allusion to the song "Black Roses Red". I have never seen *The Sisterhood of the Travelling Pants* , just for the record.

Chapter Twenty-Three:

Sasuke's Face Half In Shadow: The shadows of the tree's leaves make it look like the curse mark is spread over Sasuke's face—at this point in time in the story, he's half converted from his old ways to his new ways. He's mid-way between Sasuke at the beginning of Blind and Sasuke and the end of it.

Konoha's Cherry Blossom Never Fades: Some foreshadowing that Sakura is not going to die in the story.

Nariko's jealousy: I think this is where a lot of people got the misconception that this fic would have an ItachixNariko fanfic. This isn't symbolic but I felt that it should be mentioned. Nariko's jealousy is like that of a child. She selfishly wants all Itachi's attention—she's never had anyone pay any attention to her before, and now she doesn't want to give it up. The reason Nariko doesn't initially like Konan is because she feels that Konan steals away Itachi's attention. This is all due to Nariko's underdeveloped mentality.

Konan's comment on disfiguration: This comment Konan throws playfully at Itachi before he leaves to retrieve the Shichibi comes back to haunt them both in Chapter 71 when Itachi is left barely alive by Sasuke. This is foreshadowing.

Chapter Twenty-Six:

Kit: This one is pretty obvious, but just thought I'd say. Konan calls Nariko "Kit", because Itachi's name means weasel. And the way Nariko follows Itachi around, it's like she's the weasel's kit. :3

The Paper Konan is writing on: The page Konan is working with is the representation of Nariko. The way Konan folds the paper represents how she and Itachi help shape her and change her. But

when the ink flicks off the end of the brush and lands on the page, it foreshadows Nariko's loss of innocence.

Chapter Twenty-Eight:

Sasuke's dream: In Sasuke's dream, Sakura points at the Land of Waves on a map and says 'there are problems there' and that in order for 'everyone to be safe' they have to get rid of the problems. This is foreshadowing to the showdown between Sasuke and Itachi, which takes place in the Land of Waves. Now, don't mistaken this dream as Sasuke subconsciously knowing that he'll fight Itachi. Dreams are a good way to foreshadow things, and many great writers use it. For example: J.K. Rowling has a dream sequence in the first Harry Potter book where Harry dreams he's wearing Quirrel's turban and it's talking to him, telling him it's his destiny to be in Slythren. Now, only if you've read the whole book do you realize what a big spoiler it is. Same thing goes here.

The Pinky Finger: Dedicated anime fans and manga readers will understand this bit, but for those who are newer on the scene, I thought I'd explain. Raising your pinky finger represents your significant other. The linking of pinky fingers is a bond or promise of friendship. But in this part of the story when Tokugawa raises his pinky at Naruto in a questioning manner, he is quietly asking Naruto if Sasuke and Sakura are actually together.

Chapter Thirty-Two:

Upright Floating Tea Leaf: This was floating in Sasuke's mug of tea. In Japan, this is a sign of good luck. I used this to foreshadow that things will go well between Sasuke and Sakura in the future. Also the part "staring at the floating bit without really seeing it" signifies that Sakura is unaware of this approaching future.

Chapter Thirty-Three:

Call of a single crow: This happens during their conversation about death and killing people. There's an old rhyme I read once which

went hand in hand with superstitions about what it meant if you saw so many black birds. One black bird meant sorrow. The conversation here, is sorrowful.

Chapter Thirty-Four:

Sasuke's returning sight: Sakura's line: "I'm glad that you can tell the difference between the light and the dark now, Sasuke..."

Foreshadowing, foreshadowing, foreshadowing.

The other signature: When Sasuke, Sakura, and Naruto leave the house to go out for dinner, Tokugawa's great nephew runs into an adult signature. Said signature leaves the house after Team Seven does. Now nobody made the connection because nobody looked. But The boy told his parents that Team Seven was going out for dinner—and they only found this out because when you see a child sulking, you typically ask them what's wrong (if they're your child). The boy wasn't spying on them, but he tipped off the adults, and Team Seven was actually followed to the restaurant. Though they weren't overheard, they were spied on. And it's only if you look carefully that you'll notice this.

Chapter Thirty-Five:

Sasuke's Dream: This is another big one. This whole dream is an allusion to the song *Leave Out All the Rest* by Linkin Park. Only two people got this reference, which is okay, because I'm going to be explaining it to you now. This whole dream is basically foreshadowing to Sasuke's leaving. Sasuke refers back to this dream a lot through the story as he contemplates leaving Konoha again. It is because of this dream that he decides he will come back, and it is also what ensures that he lets Sakura he will return. As for the curse-seal form of Sasuke appearing in this dream, it symbolizes that Sasuke is still keeping a grip on power. So to put all the pieces together in one sentence: this dream symbolizes the type of things that would have happened if Sasuke hadn't stopped his quest for power.

A World of Fragile things: This is an allusion to the song *Holding My Last Breath* by Evanescence. This ties into the dream, as the words compliment Sakura's death in the dream. The section of the lyrics "a world of fragile things" ties back into Sasuke's thought of Sakura being delicate in the rose symbolism.

Powerful chakra signature: Not at all symbolic. It just introduces Yugito, but you don't know it's her at the time. I'm still surprised at how many people thought it was magical Kisame. XD

Chapter Thirthy-Six:

Itachi and Sasuke confrontation #1: This is the first crossing of the two worlds—the first time the Sasuke/Sakura timeline intertwines with the Itachi/Nariko/Akatsuki timeline. This strengthens the story in that it builds up a foundation to their second meeting—so it doesn't seem random. It's hard to explain... Also, in this meeting, Sasuke lists a number of things he had destroyed and thrown away to live for that moment. But the second time they meet—and the first time they fight—Sasuke has built up new things around him, new bonds, and loyalties, and love. Only with these things is he able to beat Itachi. And without them (i.e. in this segment) he would have been unable to.

Chapter Thirty-Eight: **Missing symbolism due to computer crash from Chapters 38 to 70. Hopefully I'll recover it so I don't have to redo it.**

Chapter Seventy-One:

Nariko's gravestone : For some reason, it really bothers me that the name on Nariko's gravestone doesn't match the one she went by. I did that on purpose. It represents that the villagers never knew who she was. That to them she was just an accursed name, and nothing more. Nariko didn't exist to them, just like the name on her gravestone never existed to her. Symbolically, the name on Nariko's gravestone is someone who never existed—Nariko is the person Nariko truly was, while the name on the gravestone was who the

villagers thought she was. Things like this in novels tear at my heart—I can't believe I just did it in this one.

VI. Version 2.0

I have mentioned to quite a few of you about something I call "Version 2.0". Some of you may be hearing about it for the first time, and others may not know what it means.

Version 2.0, put simply, is a polished up version of Blind. Now, this does not mean I'm going to be changing the story at all. Basically what it means is that I'll be going through it again, and fixing the spelling and the grammar, fixing a couple little 'oops's and filling some tiny plot-pinholes. Think of the version you just read being my first draft—or maybe my draft 1.5, because my editor edited draft one. After everything is edited, I'll replace all the chapters that are posted online. I'm not going to tell you guys when the second version is updated, because essentially it'll be the same as the first, with fewer errors.

The only part I may alter to some degree is the part about Sakura's depression, which sparked a lot of controversy and anger from some. One of said angry reviewers said that even if it's a fictional story, I chose a real life problem and treated it with a real-life solution, and according to them, did a botched job of it. So I'm seriously thinking of changing the solution so it's a little less 'real-life' and more of a Narutoverse solution. It's just that I'm tired of the negative responses I'm getting over that particular section; even though they are fairly few, they're nasty enough for me to want to avoid more of it.

So, that is what Version 2.0 is.

VII. Information on the Sequel:

Now the sequel is going to be more focused on completing the story part, not so much the metaphorical stuff. It's going to be more action-packed, but it'll contain meaning as well. And there will be Uchiha babies. Yep .^^ And Sasuke's actually a pretty good father—imho. How to talk about it without revealing stuff...hmm...

For starters, there is a time skip of eight or ten years from the end of Blind to the beginning of the sequel. I can't decide if I want it to be eight years or ten years yet, because that determines ages of certain characters. But I'll work that out. Also, a few things happen during the time-skip that are important, but ten years is too much time to write about, so I'm going to be trying a different writing style.

I've decided fanfiction is a good way to experiment with different writing styles so that when I get to writing my own books, I'll have some experience in the field. Now one of my favourite TV shows is LOST, and I love how they've portrayed the show with flashbacks to make characters more rounded. I've decided to experiment with something similar, but in writing. It creates a perfect atmosphere to reveal the events that happened in the time-skip while keeping to the story.

Also in the sequel we will see the reappearances of some of our favourite characters. Of course it's SasuSaku again, but the official side-pairing will be ItaKonan. But we will also get to run into Sai again, and involve Deidara in the story. We will also be seeing the long-needed reappearance of Orochimaru as our villain and I'm also going to sort out Madara and Pain all in one fell swoop. Except I hope to achieve a more dramatic end to Pain than the one we see in the manga. i.e. A little less corny. :p

We will also get to see whatever happened to Itachi, and what happened with Konan. Of course, Naruto becomes Hokage. And I will also reveal whatever happened to the InoShikaTema triangle—but doesn't play an overly large role in the story.

I think that's all I want to reveal at this point. I'm not going to answer any questions about the sequel that may arise from you as readers .

This is as much as you get.

Now, for a pre-typed scene! This is a bit of dialogue that takes place between Sasuke and Sakura, which happens closer to the beginning of the story. Speculate and chew on it. XD

"Am I going crazy...or has the world suddenly lost all its colour?" Sakura murmured as she sat next to Sasuke under the large tree in their yard, "It's like...it doesn't matter anymore... The colour is muted—suppressed."

"You'll grow used to it after a while," Sasuke muttered bitterly in response, "And eventually the colour will return."

She turned to look at him, her passive expression studying him sorrowfully. A forced calm expression resided on his face, and she did not know how to react. She wanted to burst into tears, and sigh and suppress her feelings to nothing, at the same time.

"Was this what the world looked like to you after...?" she trailed off. One tragedy was hard enough to deal with without mentioning another. Sasuke may have made peace with the loss of the clan years ago, but she was almost afraid that the most recent loss would enhance the memory of the previous one.

"Hn," he replied listlessly.

She embraced him, now understanding the horror of a colourless world, tears creeping under her eyelids against her will, "I wish that you didn't have to go through that... I'm so sorry."

"It's not as bad this time," he replied, the arm around her tightening, pulling her closer to him. His voice seemed choked as he continued, "It's better this time because...I'm not alone."

A/N: And with that, I will leave you to ponder this chapter of extras and leave you with anticipation for the sequel! I hope you all enjoyed the extras, and I'll see you all in the next story! I will be posting news items on my profile in regards to writings, though I do have a couple other fic ideas that I may work on in the meantime.